The Amphibious Public: A historical geography of municipal swimming and bathing New York City, 1870 - 2013

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The Amphibious Public:
A historical geography of municipal swimming and bathing
New York City, 1870 – 2013

By

Naomi Adiv

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Earth and Environmental Sciences
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Earth and Environmental Sciences in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

The Amphibious Public:
A historical geography of municipal swimming and bathing
New York City, 1870 – 2013

By
Naomi Adiv

Advisor: Professor Setha Low

Since 1870, the city of New York has engaged in a project of building and maintaining enclosed sites for municipal bathing, including building floating ‘river baths’ (1870 – 1942), indoor municipal baths (1901 – 1975), eleven enormous outdoor pools built with WPA funds (1936 – present), and outdoor pools of various sizes built under the Lindsay administration (1968 – present). This dissertation explores the changing rationale, over almost 150 years, for the municipal construction of public bathing places in New York City, and the ways in which the physical structures have taken on new social goals, meanings and ideals, both for patrons and for agents of municipal government over time.

Each bathhouse and pool is a physical site that belongs to an infrastructural network, and is also bound up in its relationship to reigning ideas about what public space should encompass and for whom it should provide. Throughout, water has been attributed particular characteristics in order to mediate social life in public space, through programs of building, teaching and regulating. These are theorized in terms of public space and the public life that bring them together as a material, technological, symbolic whole.

The municipal bathing project has resulted in corporeal publics over time, which produce public social life through the bodies of users, both real and ideal, through
infrastructures that integrate materials, water, capital and political will. Contests over who belongs to the corporeal public and how it should be managed, based on race, gender and sexuality, class, and age, are mediated through shifting notions of hygiene and wellness in the urban setting.

Research methods include archival research in New York City since 1870, including municipal records, other local archives, newspaper sources, and secondary histories; observation (and some participation) and interviews with the Harlem Honeys and Bears, an African-American senior citizen synchronized swim team; and comparative ethnography of outdoor pools in the summer, including extended participant observation at Kosciuszko Pool and McCarren Pool in Brooklyn, as well as interviews with Parks Department officials.
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Chapter One: Introduction

The public swimming pool as we know it today—a tank of clear, chlorinated water where city dwellers swim and splash, or frolic on the concrete deck—has resulted from a series of bathing arrangements in North American cities over more than 150 years, each with its own social goals, building style, and program. In New York City, the enclosure of water for public use since 1870 has included the river baths, where slatted tanks allowed river water to flow through, surrounded by docks and changing rooms; indoor municipal bath houses full of showers, or rain baths, numbering twenty-two at their peak across the five boroughs (many of them now recreation centers run by the Department of Parks); eleven enormous outdoor pools built with WPA funds under Parks Commissioner Robert Moses in the summer of 1936; and the nineteen outdoor pools built under the Lindsay administration in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As the infrastructure for municipal bathing has persisted in New York’s landscape over time, the social goals and ideals around them have shifted as the physical structures have taken on new meanings both for patrons and for agents of municipal government. This dissertation explores the changing rationale, over almost 150 years, for the municipal construction of public bathing places in New York City, and how different groups of people have understood and made use of these facilities over time.

Since the Metropolitan Bathing Association sunk the first municipal floating bath into the East River in 1870 (and for a number of decades before), New York City’s indoor and outdoor bath houses and pools have attracted the attentions of reformers, public health officials, and educators interested, variously, in equal distribution of spatial goods, health and well-being, and social control—particularly of poor people. At the same time, the myriad
swimmers, splashers and bathers from around the city have shaped the space as well, sometimes through political advocacy, but more often by using the municipal bathing structures in the ways they have seen fit. Sometimes these two groups have agreed on the purpose and kind of structures that would best serve users; at other times, conflicts have arisen over resources, knowledges, and desires for the spaces.

This is not the only public project of its kind: the state has long mobilized open spaces and public infrastructure in an attempt to intervene in people’s health and well-being, including parks, playgrounds and beaches. Frederick Law Olmsted, one of the principal designers of Central Park, asserted that “no one who has closely observed the conduct of the people who visit the Park can doubt that it exercises a distinctly harmonizing and refining influence upon the most unfortunate and most lawless classes of the city” (Olmsted, 1870, cited in Jackson and Dunbar, 2002, p. 288). Sites of water, however, put much more intensive demands on the bodies of users: both exposing them to, and protecting them from, danger, while at once encouraging them to participate in state-funded sites of hygiene.

This dissertation argues that, in all of these programs, the municipal bathing project has produced corporeal publics¹ which, rather than em-bodying the heady ideas of an imagined and universal ‘public,’ produce public social life through the bodies of users, both real and ideal, through infrastructures that integrate materials, water, capital and political will. Through hydrosocial infrastructures including bath houses and pools—spaces of cleansing, cooling leisure, pleasure, and sex—the public/private distinction is negotiated as the municipal state

¹ The term ‘corporeal public’ is sometimes used in the literature to describe the non-virtual public spaces in the internet age (Kayden, 2005 as cited in Shaftoe, 2008), while for Page (2013) “Corporeal public property refers to tangible, identifiable lands” (p. 2).
produces and governs sites in which the physical space and social subjects are co-constructed. In the municipal bathing project, contests over who belongs to the corporeal public and how it should be managed based on race, gender and sexuality, class, and age are mediated through shifting notions of hygiene and wellness in the urban setting.

Throughout this work I refer to the public swimming pool, and the bath that preceded it, as a municipal public space: one that is owned and operated by the municipal state, governed by its terms of management and rule-making (even if occasionally funded by extra-municipal bodies). While the idea of ‘the public’ is not always tied squarely to the state, the public spaces I refer to here are state-owned and managed spaces. (This presents a problematic of conflating the public with the state more generally, which I address later in this chapter.)

In this chapter, I will first offer some rationale for this project: why study the pools and baths in New York City at all? What purpose does this study serve and how does it intervene in the existing literature on public space? Next, I offer a theoretical framework for understanding the municipal bathing project, in which the state, through programs of building, teaching, and regulating, mediates social life in and through public spaces of water. From there, I describe the methods I used and how they serve the questions I am trying to answer: how the data were collected and what I gathered, how data were categorized, and what can (and cannot) be explained through analysis of data. In this section, I also offer a short reflection on the place of my own subjectivity as a researcher in data collection that was, at times, intensely physical and exposing. Finally, I describe each chapter of the dissertation to follow in turn, and how it contributes to the main premises of the project.
Rationale

I study the municipal pool, and its antecedent in the floating baths and indoor bathhouses, in order to understand the kinds of social lives that are negotiated in and through public space, and in order to understand at least one aspect of municipal governance in New York City. I follow the lead of scholars who examine a kind of public space, such as plazas (Low, 2000), sidewalks (Ehrenfeucht and Loukaitou-Sideris, 2007) or Privately Owned Public Spaces (POPS) (Miller, 2007), both as a starting point from which to generate theory, and as an object lesson. In his work on skateboarders in the city, Borden (2001) speaks to this specificity, noting that "time, space and social being are interproduced. Space-production cannot then be reduced to theories of it, but must be seen as a process involving not only theories but also practices, objects, ideas, imagination and experience" (p. 11). Thus, one reason to study pools is to find out more about the worlds that pools produce, as they are a fixture of public life in many cities.

A number of perspectives on the various municipal bathing projects in American cities inform this project. Historians have engaged different aspects of the national effort for public bathing in the late 19th and early 20th century, including the bathhouse project across cities (An, 2005; Glassberg, 1979; Williams, 1991), and the social history of public pools, focusing especially on race and racism (Wiltse, 2007). Others have focused on New York City specifically, including its bathhouses (Renner, 2008) and pools (Gutman, 2007, 2008). Urbanists including Watson (2006) and Iveson (2007) have both devoted sections of larger works on public spaces to specific disputes over swimming pools, in order to ask questions about how inclusion and
exclusion in public spaces is justified, particularly for minority or subaltern groups. I add to the conversation on pools and baths by engaging questions about how the state and the public work out questions of health and well being through large infrastructural projects of bathing water over time.

In terms of the literature on public space (which I address later on in this chapter) public bathing also provokes questions about how universal notions of ‘the public’ that include a putative ‘everyone’ are inverted in particular places in order to separate and exclude classes of people. By studying places with a long and explicit history of segregation, by race and by class, and which have a fraught history of gender separation, we can understand the operations through which groups of people are included or excluded from a universalizing notion of the public, and how that separation is portrayed for various parties.

The historic character of the pools and baths, which I detail more in the later section on methods, is also part of the rationale for this study, as they are a kind of public space which has changed character a number of times in their almost 150 years. As Mintz notes, in the introduction to *Sweetness and Power* (1985):

> Without history [Anthropology’s] explanatory power is seriously compromised. Social phenomena are by their nature historical, which is to say that the relationships among events in one 'moment' can never be abstracted from their past and future setting. (p. xxx)

(Although Mintz discusses Anthropology, this notion is applies to Human Geography as well.) The pools and bathhouses that I write about belong to the set of public spaces, places over which the definition of and resources for public life are fought for. By writing the social phenomenon of public bathing in the frame of historical geography, I set this project not only in
space, but also in time – the past and also the future—at a moment when the provision and maintenance of public spaces is under intense pressure.

There is also the question of why one would study the public spaces in New York City, specifically. New York’s age, density, complexity, and economic and political power, both in the United States and in the world, make the city a magnet for scholars and writers who are attracted to its many universities, deep archives and rich scholarly resources, as well as a large body of extant literature from which to work. By the same token, however, New York also gets ‘overstudied’ – to the exclusion of other places, some argue. Additionally, much of the knowledge generated about places, spaces and users in New York City is often not generalizable to other North American cities because of how different it is, in terms of size, wealth, density and demography. Perhaps it can, however, be generalized to other ‘world cities,’ or cities of similar size and density outside of North America. Yet this was not always true – especially in the early historical periods discussed here, New York was one among many cities making attempts at comprehensive programs of municipal bathing, and could be a source for comparison. As well—either because of, or in spite of, this overemphasis on New York in the urbanist literature—the city also gets a good deal of attention from scholars and policy makers in other places who note, for instance, how New York has or has not used its wealth of resources effectively to serve an extremely heterogeneous (if often segregated) populous.

From a different angle, studying the place where one resides binds the researcher up in her subject in a way that has a particular kind of high stakes: ethical questions arise, to subject and to site, such as the responsibility in this case to speak out when state resources are cut
back, particularly for the poorest New Yorkers. Additionally, a local audience is always more present, and there is no clear moment when—especially in ethnography—one can exit the site and stop completely. While one could argue that this rationale contains the fallacy that we dwell only at one political or geographical scale, the point here is that there is a different, level of investment in research in the well-being of a place where the researcher resides, as opposed to a place that is a far-away ‘site’ for study to go away and return to (De Genova, 2007; di Leonardo, 1998). For me, New York operates both as a ‘type’ of urban place, and also my home. I study the pools here because I have become invested in this place, and I believe that, for the ethical questions it raises, it is important to begin here.

Another reason to study the municipal pools in New York, and particularly the free outdoor pools with which I began my inquiry is that, to a great extent, they work. The outdoor pools in New York City operate all summer, free of charge, and receive nearly two million visits each season. (Of the ten biggest cities in the United States, at least six operate free pools all summer—in this way, New York is representative of a policy choice that is not totally unique to this setting.) The choice to operate free pools runs counter to a trend of privatization of public spaces that is well documented in the literature on contemporary neoliberal urbanism (Clarke, 20014; Hackworth, 2007; Harvey, 2005; Kohn, 2004; Mayer in Leitner, et.al., 2007; Peck and

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2 As a small contribution to this issue, I wrote two Letters to the Editor of the New York Times while doing field research. The first, which was published in December 19, 2010, addressed the 2011 fee hikes at New York City’s recreation centers. The second, which addressed the hasty closure of Hansborough pool for renovation, and the dislocation of the Harlem Honeys and Bears, was not accepted. Find both in Appendix I. This is one way I felt I could honor the early requests of the Harlem Honeys and Bears to help them mobilize resources from the city.

3 In Summer, 2010 (June 29 – September 6), Parks operated 54 outdoor pools, serving a total of 1,904,456 visits. See Appendix B for complete breakdown by pool. (J. Sheppard, Assistant to the First Deputy Commissioner, personal communication March 18, 2011).

4 These are New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia Washington DC, San Antonio. (Los Angeles and Washington DC are free only for youth, under 18.)
Tickell, 2002). The growth of the complex of public-private partnerships, parks conservancies, concession contracts and outright sale of public spaces in the past thirty years suggests that the free pool should not exist; yet the City of New York operates over 50 outdoor pools and mini-pools, and has since the early 1970s. Against the trend towards neoliberal governance—urban and otherwise—in the contemporary moment, we might instead develop a longer-term understanding about the potential for financing public spaces for urban well-being into the future.

This does not mean New York’s municipal pools are without problems: the outdoor pools are only open when public school is out for the summer, long after temperatures in the city have gotten uncomfortably hot; they are weighted down with a list of rules that intimidate new users⁵; many showcase the city’s most intensive racial and class segregation; and they are kept in widely variable states of repair across boroughs based on what seems to correlate with wealth and political influence.

However, while the tradition of critical theory leads many social scientists—including me—to decry what is broken in our cities, I came to this study interested in what has succeeded over the course of the municipal bathing project at different moments, and for whom it has worked. By studying the pools and baths in their specificity, I would like to mobilize the study of public space for thinking about common provisioning for universal human needs: from toilets to recreational venues, public baths and pools have regularly filled such roles. While The Amphibious Public considers how the structures and ideals around municipal bathing have changed over time to both positive and negative ends, I also hope to demonstrate that it

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⁵ See Appendix C: NYC Parks Outdoor Pool Rules.
represents the potential for a public life, or a life held in common in the urban setting, that is more robust for offering many kinds of sensory environments: not just parks and plazas, but water, too, as part of the lexicon of spaces that people in a city might engage. In the everyday, mundane functions of the public pool, I document not just what is strange, crumbling, or lost, but also how what has been built persists and is used, how it has thrived.

Finally, this work also contributes to a literature on how we become who we are through the spaces where we live, and how we might use those spaces to achieve greater equality. Skeggs (1999) calls on scholars to be specific in the spatial subjectivities of today in order to consider what might be fought for in the future.

So there is now a need to look to that beyond the incorporated, beyond the availability of already known subject position and identities. ... It is only in the concrete articulations of living the everyday, in the struggles for future space, that one can begin to understand what is and what is not beyond incorporation. This is precisely why a great deal more research is needed which focuses on the intersections, the constitution, categorizations and disruptions that occur in specific leisure (and other) space. Researchers who inform policy and planning should show how blanket generalizations about gender, race, and sexuality cannot be made. (Skeggs, 1999, p. 229).

To this end, I draw on ethnographic themes, both in the archive and in contemporary observation, in order to ask how people engage the physical structures around them—those that they have access to and those that they don’t and those that they wish for—in order to derive meaning, and to inflect these everyday places with a vibrant public life.
Theoretical frames

**Co-construction: the public, the (hydro)social and infrastructure**

Co-construction is the concept that, in social settings, space, people and ideas do not come into being independently, but are built up at the same time, influenced by one another. Low (2000) explains, “the social construction of space is the actual transformation of space... into scenes and actions that convey meaning" (p. 128). When spaces and their subjects are transformed together, there is co-construction. In certain situations, often at a historical moment of transition in how space is through of or used, it is possible to see how the particulars of this process occurred. As the physical structures for municipal bathing have shifted over time, so too have the expectations for the behaviors and bodily abilities of their users.

To take an example of how co-construction operates, in their account of the rise of public sidewalks in late 19th-century Los Angeles, Ehrenfeucht and Loukaitou-Sideris (2009) outline the process through which durable paving materials were invested with legal definitions of rights-of-way in order to produce a new urban subject: the pedestrian. “The pedestrian’s unobstructed mobility became the justification that underlay other activity restrictions, and the pedestrian became the public for whom the sidewalks were being provided” (p. 17). Advances in law and materials engineering were adopted to co-construct space, action and subject. Of course, people walked in the city all the time before the advent of the sidewalk, but with this new type of space came a designation, with grounds for rights-making and a standard of safety to which walkers were entitled, as well as new sets of rules and restrictions: pedestrian traffic
must keep moving, peddling must take place during designated hours or on sidewalks of designated widths, etc.

In baths and pools, we can identify a similar style of co-construction, which has occurred and re-occurred at many points throughout the municipal bathing project. The activities of social swimming and bathing that were already occurring in nineteenth century New York, in venues such as the riverbank or the private commercial bathhouse, were now ‘made public’ in the municipal spaces, through the efforts of reformers and the state. As in the case of the pedestrian and the sidewalk, the bathhouse, with its focus on order through hygiene and skill (see Chapter Two), was achieved through particular infrastructural capacities and choices. Rose (1999) notes that this was part of a larger project of establishing a style of governance in the mid-nineteenth century, in which “concerns about poverty and inequality would be shifted from the political to the social sphere” (p. 123). In order to do this, “new regimes of the body - its purity, its hygiene, its sexual continence” (p. 104) had to be established, and one of the central techniques for facilitating this shift was “in new moral habitats - public parks, municipal swimming pools... Thus the space of the town became intelligible in new ways, in the spatial imagination produced by all those who thought that in order to govern relations between people more effectively one had first to inscribe them” (pp. 104 - 5). In later programs of the municipal bathing project that included sport, recreation and leisure, spaces and participants were co-constructed in different iterations, through infrastructures, costumes, and symbols of urban public life, but always through group use of water.

A useful concept in understanding water as a medium for other social projects, in this case through public space, is the hydrosocial cycle (Kaika, 2005; Swyngedouw, 2004;
Swyngedouw, Henen, & Kaika 2006; Swyngedouw, Kaika, & Castro, 2002). Against a strictly hydrological model in which water is understood as an element of the ‘natural’ world, Swyngedouw (2009) asserts, “hydraulic environments are socio-physical constructions that are actively and historically produced, both in terms of social content and physical-environmental qualities” (p. 56). While much of the literature on the hydrosocial informs problems such as the provision and privatization of drinking water infrastructure (including ownership, provision, and maintenance), in this work I deploy the hydrosocial, to include bathing water and its associated infrastructures.

Particularly in cities, the hydrosocial helps us to understand the ways that infrastructure extends the metabolic systems of our bodies out into the environment that surrounds us. As Gandy (2004) offers,

> Water is not simply a material element in the production of cities but is also a critical dimension to the social production of space. Water implies a series of connectivities between the body and the city, between social and bio-physical systems, between the evolution of water networks and capital flows, and between the visible and invisible dimensions to urban space. (p. 373)

The connections between body and city include aqueducts, water mains, pipes, home taps, and tiled bathrooms, as well as the capital and political will to both invest in and maintain these. Within this larger development of urban metabolism, the bathhouse and the pool exist among a number of kinds of opposites: individuated home showers as opposed to social bathing, exclusive social bathing in private clubs as opposed to the municipal, etc. One example of what Gandy describes here is that with the rise of plumbing, we also see the rise of a new style of individuated bathing, that “redefined the body and bodily relations” (Kaika, 2000, p. 126). Washing and grooming the body has been deemed a private act through regimes of building, at
least for some classes of people or at some times.

By building and re-building state infrastructures for bathing, the municipal bathing embedded the social in physical structures, reflecting some of these changes in relationships between body and city. At the indoor bathhouses, this meant building from the latest in durable, washable materials, along with architectural details meant to produce an austere, 'orderly' look (Gerhard, 1908; Hoy, 1995; Kroeber, 1976). Traces of the shifts in co-construction appear especially in moments of architectural transition, such as in changes in the shape of the pool in the early years. When structured sport overtook cleansing as the main thrust of swimming pools, the shapes and sizes of pools changed as well as well: "A swimming basin is usually oblong in shape, but sometimes it is circular or its plan may be a rectangle with one or both ends semicircular" (Gerhard, 1908, p. 65). While competitive swimming required the rectangle that now seems commonplace, the ovo-rectangle betrays the shift from giant bathtub to racetrack in the early 1900s.

Public space, as Mitchell notes, “is the product of competing ideologies about what constitutes that space” (2003, p. 129). In the case of New York’s municipal bathing project, social bathing was made public by the state—in order to promote a regulated, disciplined public. This effort was bolstered by particular definitions of health, sport and leisure that defined how bathing ought to operate in public space and, in turn, who was a qualified member

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6 Glassberg (1979) points out that in the case of the river bath, “the flimsy seasonal wooden structures needed almost constant repair” (p. 7).

7 In New York City, Parks officials often attempted to push this program forward, such as, in 1946, when showers were still receiving a fair amount of use at the neighborhood Rec Centers, Parks Engineer William Latham writes, “a question has been raised as to whether or not we should retain the free public cleansing baths. If we can eliminate this facility, we can develop a much better plan. It seems to me that the age is passed with the City should be required to provide free bathing facilities, and I think we should eliminate them in the new plan” (Latham, September 25, 1946).
of that public. From the unregulated riverbank ‘urchin,’ the floating bath and the indoor bathhouse were meant to produce ‘the swimmer’ and ‘the bather,’ increasingly bounded in a cube of space and a limit of showering time. As demand for recreation came to supplant cleansing baths, structured identities of sport came to fill in the space, with hygiene coming to mean not just scrubbing, but also physical fitness. Yet resistance emerged at various times, not only from the mostly working-class and immigrant patrons towards the state, but also from different corners of the ruling classes—between and among charitable organizations, the Department of Health, the Department of Parks, the Mayor’s office and others—over purpose, budgeting and appropriate behavior of patrons.

As the state arranges (hydro)-social life through public space, water is attributed particular characteristics in order to achieve social goals. In this dissertation, I show how the municipal government of New York City has used the waters of the municipal bathing project differently over time to mediate social life in public space, through programs of building, teaching and regulating, which I outline here in turn. The complex of these makes each bathhouse and pool a physical site that belongs to an infrastructural network, and which is also bound up in its relationship to reigning ideas about what public space should encompass and for whom it should provide, as well as the given reasons for building these.

**Building**

Urban public health began as an infrastructural project, most notably in the grand effort to build closed, underground sewers to replace the cesspools and open sewers that were the source of so many urban epidemics in western cities in the 19th century. Other initiatives
followed, including the provision of clean drinking water, building codes, and regulations on venues for food production and processing. Some of these projects were state-initiated, while many resulted from pressure by reform groups and the increasingly well-organized medical and engineering professions, and were later codified as law at various levels of jurisdiction; the municipal bathing project was initiated through a combination of these.

In order to think about bathing spaces as a form of mediation of the social through public space, I begin by examining the physical bathing spaces that the city has built over time, and the resources mobilized to do so, including capital, materials and water. This complex makes up the *infrastructure* of bathing, which Larkin (2013) explains as follows:

> Infrastructures are matter that enable the movement of other matter. Their peculiar ontology lies in the facts that they are things and also the relation between things... What distinguishes infrastructures from technologies is that they are objects that create the grounds on which other objects operate, and when they do so they operate as systems. (p. 329)

In addition to moving water through the pipes, and people through the spaces, baths and pools are also part of the hydrosocial infrastructure of the city around which the idea of hygiene was built – *cleanliness in, disease out*. Following from the idea urban metabolism above, municipal bathing is part of the circulatory system of the city. And as in any system of circulation, that which is circulating and the channels that promote or suppress circulation function as a productive whole: blood flows through the capillary because the tissue is specialized enough to allow for the exchange of oxygen, and electricity flows speedily through wires made of conductive metals. Circulation, too, describes the function of the infrastructure for municipal bathing. The shape and distribution of its attendant structures affects who moves through and
how. While it moves people and water, it can also be both rhetorically and physically engaged as safe or unsafe, suitable or dangerous, clean or filthy.

City dwellers encounter infrastructure recursively—with and without awareness—throughout their days and years. Different parties, including parks administrators, members of the public, conservancies, and philanthropists compete for control of the spaces and the kinds of circulation that occur in them through rule making and surveillance, testing of limits, capital investment and design choices. The latter tends to be the most hidden, as “management in a technological system often chooses technical components that support the structure, or organizational form of management” (Hughes, as cited in Bijker, Hughes, & Pinch 1987, p. 52). That is to say, bathing infrastructure was and is meant to produce a certain kind of space to produce particular kinds of public engagement. Yet the program that the builders (city engineers, designers and administrators) have in mind is not necessarily in line with the interpretations that patrons bring to these sites. Still, management doesn’t always have the last word; different ideas about what sorts of behaviors are safe or permissible intersect with the physical structures, and the kinds of skills that are required in order to participate.

**Teaching**

Throughout the publications surrounding the different programs for bathing infrastructure over time runs tremendous anxiety on the part of reformers and municipal authorities “as to the pool’s purpose: bathing, playing or competitive swimming” (Lupkin, 2010, p. 116). Teaching children (and adults) to swim has gone in and out of fashion as the main thrust of municipal bathing programs, sometimes for fitness and at other times out of concern
over high rates of drowning. At times, swimming lessons justify the support of capital-intensive infrastructure designed for what might otherwise be understood as mere play. And, in turn, pools (and floating baths before them) are instructive environments: unlike learning to swim in open water, a swimming tank is an environment with much greater control, both for instructor and student, offering a gradient of depths, greater visibility, and a stable wall to hold on to. But teaching has not been limited to swimming. In some periods, teaching has also meant imparting ‘the bathing habit’, as in the decades of the early twentieth century when showers were installed in public schools as part of a larger program of hygiene education (see Chapter Two).

In some historical periods in the United States, learning to swim was part of the mandate of public education, but currently it is not. While swimming lessons in New York City in the summer are currently free, students must enroll by lottery, which means that this limited resource is evenly distributed, but not universal. People still drown every year and Black and Latino people, especially children, drown the most (Hastings, Zahran, & Cable 2006; see Chapter Four). Often, swimming lessons are seen as a plain antidote to drowning, but swimming manuals over the 19th and 20th centuries also proposed that swimming, more than other physical exercise, strengthens character. Today’s support for swimming, as expressed in manuals and advertisements for swimming programs, is as exercise meant to produce fit bodies, calm stress, and fight childhood obesity.

Anthropologist Talal Assad, in a 2006 interview with David Scott, offers that “the etymology of 'docile'... is 'teachable.' So I'm interested in 'the docile subject' as someone who is teachable and therefore as someone who has the capacity to be taught” (Scott, 2006, p. 287). In this turn into the meaning of the word, Assad points at the tension in Foucault’s ‘docile body'
that is so often the at the center of discussions of power relations: that the docile body is not an indifferent body, that there is the potential for an exchange of teaching and learning in this relationship too. And it is inside of the tension between those notions that I turn to the third element of the municipal bathing project, regulating.

**Regulating**

Over the course of the municipal bathing project, bodies have been a locus of regulation, through techniques that include regulating personal practices through teaching the ‘bathing habit’ in schools and in bathhouses, regulating gender and sexual interaction through gender separated swim times (and then mandatory co-gender swim times, beginning in the late 1920s and early 1930s), and regulating fitness at times, through mandatory swimming lessons in public schools. Each of these practices highlight the ways in which the municipal pool collapses ideas of publicness with a hydrosocial project that involves both big ideas about what it means to be healthy, and big pieces of infrastructure. This complex of things and ideas can be described as ‘biopolitical’ (Foucault, 2010) in nature, but what kind of biopolitical project is it?

In “The Politics of Life Itself” (2001), Rose traces the movement of biopolitics from the 19th century to the present. Rose begins with Foucault’s (1979) explanation of biopolitics as the management of life by political authorities, through “techniques, technologies, experts and apparatuses for the care and administration of the life of each and all, from town planning to health services” (p. 3). He then goes on to describe the move from 20th century biopolitical strategies that moved away from town planning and urban sewerage facilities, and towards
individual hygiene at home and at school, and the desirability of healthy, fit individuals to comprise a fit nation.

But the huge extension of the political apparatus of health in liberal democratic polities in the 19th and 20th centuries would have been inconceivable if the newly shaped values of hygiene and health had not become entangled with the aspirations of ‘the people’ themselves – especially the poor, the disadvantaged, the working classes... In this period... biopolitics was democratized, and relays were formed between political and personal aspirations for health (p. 17).

(He also discusses the role that a belief in eugenics played in this movement – not as a fascist aberration, but as an influence in mainstream human sciences in Western countries.)

Rose goes on to describe biopolitics in the 21st century as having devolved even more to the individual, now framed not in terms of national well-being, but rather in terms of economic value inside of the nation (i.e. workdays lost to [insert health problem here]) or moral terms. In this version, individuals are active partners in the ‘will to health,’ responsible for knowing their own potential membership in ‘high risk groups.’ And today biopolitics is quickly moving beyond the question of risk in populations toward the ‘ethopolitics,’ as he names it, of genetic knowledge and individual risk. But as the biopolitical project advances, municipal swimming lessons still function at the level of population risk. Here we see that, just as one municipal bathing project does not completely replace the previous one (see Chapter Two), biopolitical projects from an earlier era can operate in tandem with more contemporary modes.

A standing critique of the policies and institutions of public health and social medicine are that they “they may work modest additions of justice, but they also impose discipline...” on those who they are meant to help, particularly poor people (Rodgers, 1998, p. 23). So one way to understand the environment of municipal pools and baths is necessarily through the double-
edged social mission of equitable distribution and discipline, in which the establishment of public space becomes a technique of social governance.

A primary site for anxiety in the social politics of municipal bathing spaces is the interaction of wet, nearly naked bodies, in terms of displays of gender (Iveson, 2003; Slovic, 2008) and sexuality (including hetero and homosociality and sexual violence) (Berube, 2003; Browne, 2006; Chauncey, 1994; Grosz, 1995; Sedgwick, 1984), and race (Gutman, 2008; Renner, 2008; Shah, 2001; Wiltse, 2007). That is, part of what makes spaces public is not just that bodies interact, but that those bodies have identities and subjectivities, that they identify and are identified with groups, norms, and behaviors. As Parr (2001) reminds us, "... bodies are social entities inscribed with notions of normality, control and discipline. The supposed naturalness of the body—the movement of arms, legs, facial expression, speech acts—are aspects of corporeality that are fully socially constructed and also geographically differentiated" (Parr, 2001, p. 160). And in these acts of construction and differentiation, tremendous contests arise (see Chapter Five.) Discipline, however, is not the only outcome of these efforts; many public spaces do promote a social life in which people might mix, and which function outside of circuits of commerce in cities. In social swimming and bathing spaces, people bring embodied experiences of water with them and make meaning in and through the space: fear, joy, and relaxation. In these places, they also enter into negotiations with power—rules about appropriate clothing, surveillance by lifeguards and locker room attendants, etc.

A number of scholars have remarked upon the relationship between embodiment and public space. In her review of anthropological theorizations of bodies in space and place, Low (2003) states, "embodied space is the location where human experience and consciousness
take on material and spatial form” (p. 10) – where our perceiving bodies encounter and inflect physical space with our ideas. Gandy (2006) offers a somewhat different interpretation, in which “we need to engage with the body both as a site of corporeal interaction with the physical spaces of the city and as a symbolic field within which different aspects to the legitimation of modern societies are played out” (p. 497). In the work that follows, I prefer the term ‘corporeal’ public, meaning of the body. This difference in language denotes a different order of events: the corporeal public is one where the body is primary to the public subject, not a skin em-bodying, or wrapped around, a more central discursive element.⁸

Through examining changes over time in the efforts building, teaching, and regulating in the municipal bathing project, we can understand the hydrosocial, biopolitical and public characteristics of state-owned public spaces. Yet, while interrogating the motivations of the municipal state in building and maintaining pools and bathhouses, my investigation is also concerned with how users activate and animate the space, how they behave and interact with one another, how they know through regulation and regular use what behaviors are admissible or not, how they experience state ideas and structures having to do with public life. Tying together this project will be the theorization of these in terms of public space and the public life that bring them together as a material, technological, symbolic whole.

⁸ Many who mention a ‘corporeal public’ are speaking in contrast to the public produced through the circulation of texts (Warner, 2002), or in contrast to the virtual public of the internet – they want to denote a public that shows up in a particular place.
What makes spaces public?

The term ‘public space’ is fraught, with a glut of over-definition. In academic literatures, it is claimed as the province of planners, urban designers, anthropologists, sociologists, and geographers, who each have distinctive language and ideas surrounding the places we consider to be public. Colloquially, we use ‘public space’ to describe the places we go every day that are not our homes or places of work – parks, sidewalks, roads. Each of these has its own rules and norms that seem natural, but which are grounded in cultural notions of what public is and does, and who counts as ‘the public’ in any particular moment. This is important because, as Newman and Clarke (2009) note, “meanings of the public and private are not merely descriptive and normative; they are cultural categories that help shape social identities and relationships” (p. 19). In this section, I will offer one structure for thinking through the ideals of public spaces—in terms of democracy, state ownership, and universal access—which are attempted and approximated again and again. I will focus on one aspect of access—belonging—which is at the heart of many conflicts over public spaces in general, and the pools in particular.

Often, Public Space is theorized in terms of democratic principles that are reflected in social structures (Arendt (1998 (1958)); Habermas, 1989; Sennett, 1974). In this interpretation, public space results from and encompasses the development of ideals of public life in western democracy. Habermas (1989) locates the origins of the modern western ideal of the public in what he calls ‘the bourgeois public sphere.’ He situates this development in particular historical circumstances, both in antiquity (in Greece and Rome) and in the early modern development of
‘civil society’ under mercantilist capitalism.\(^9\) Arendt (1998 (1958)) is concerned also with the origins of the idea of the public realm, and the difference between it and other group formations, including the household, the private, and the social.\(^10\)

Discussions of the principles and origins of the idea of the public, however, are not always the best starting points for explaining the routine decision-making in the governance and navigation of these space by users and administrators. This is not to say that pools and baths cannot or do not mobilize greater ideals of public life, but that explanations that begin with these can subsume the ways that people experience municipal public spaces. Following Low (2000), Watson (2006) and Iveson (2007), I believe that tracing the empirical changes in the everyday meaning-making activities in public spaces is vital to informing theory.

I take a structure for understanding public spaces from Miller’s (2007) *Designs on the Public*, which is a study of the Privately Owned Public Spaces (POPS) of New York City, (written into the city zoning code in 1961). This book showcases an exceptional case of city planning, in which private corporations have been allowed (and encouraged) develop and govern public spaces, in order to understand the kinds of problems that arise in a system such as this, as certain ideals of public space are placed under pressure. In the course of her analysis, Miller offers a clear and basic theoretical frame for how central ideas of public life are enacted in the design and management of public spaces. She opens with the following:

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\(^9\) Calhoun (1993) points out, “Civil society and public sphere are not precisely equivalent concepts. Indeed, the importance of the concept of public sphere is largely to go beyond general appeals to the nature of civil society in attempts to explain the social foundations of democracy and to introduce a discussion of the specific organization within civil society of social and cultural bases for the development of an effective rational-critical discourse aimed at the resolution of political disputes” (p. 269).

\(^10\) Although a vast literature exists, I will go into great depth here with theories of the public sphere (Sennett, 1994) or ‘realm’ because, as Lofland (1998) notes, *realms are not geographically or physically rooted pieces of space*. They are social, not physical territories” (p. 11). Still, it is worth keeping in mind that “Without the encounters that occur in public space, the public realm contracts” (Low, 2006, p. 43).
We tend to think of public space as having certain essential and obvious characteristics. We believe it is publicly owned... We believe it is open and accessible to everyone... We see it as somehow part of democratic life – a place for speaking out and being heard. (p. ix)

She then goes on to say that, in reality, these ideals don’t hold up, or cannot hold together—that “public space is not a concrete reality but rather a tenuous condition” (p. x), constantly under negotiation. From this interpretation, I drew a diagram that demonstrates how the tensions lie in the overlap and negotiation among and between these ideals.

![Diagram of ideals of public space]

Fig. 1.1: Ideals of public space

In the overlap between ‘Democratic’ and ‘State Owned,’ is the trouble of a state-bound public. In turn, spaces that are ‘State owned’ are often not universally accessible, through mechanisms of policing, as well as unequal distribution. Finally, ‘Democratic’ finds tension with ‘Universally Accessible,’ particularly when different groups that make up ‘the demos’ have different needs from one another at different times. Although these aspirational qualities for public space don’t always line up with the lived realities of public places, they are, however, useful
approximations, which provide a framework for thinking about what is public about public space.

**Democratic practice**

First, public spaces are—in the modern western political imaginary—a place for democratic practice. This element has at least three interpretations: gathering, rupture, and agonism. First, spaces are public because they provide a physical site for gathering: rallies, gatherings, and convergences of celebration and protest. They are places where bodies might congregate to enact the right to free speech and freedom of assembly without harassment by authorities. To this end, urban public space is frequently presented in the literature as foundational for the formation of democratic civil society, beginning with the ancient Greek *agora*, where the site is live for debates over issues of the day.

Second, and a variation on the previous, public space contains the potential for rupture, a site for political conversation and contestation, not just through oratory, but also through activist presences or demands (Benhabib, 1992; Mitchell, 1995; Mitchell, 2003). As Iveson (2007) states, “‘public space’ is understood to be any space which, through political action and public address at a particular time, become ‘the site of power, of common action coordinated through speech and persuasion’” (Iveson, 2007, p. 10). Extensive permitting laws and spatial control by police have stifled this power to gather in most American cities in the past fifty years (Staeheli, 2010). However, movements like Occupy! in cities around North America (as well as the occupations of Tahrir Square in Cairo, Taksim Square in Istanbul, university campuses in Chile and Quebec, and public plazas in Greece and Spain) have challenged this supremacy. Thus,
the potential to openly struggle over the limits of acceptable gatherings and behavior in shared space are, what many argue, make public spaces emblematic of democratic practice.

A third element of the democratic practices associated with public space is the great variety of interactions that are agonistic, or difference promoting (Amin, 2008; Carr, Francis, Rivlin & Stone, 1992; Isin, 2002; Mouffe, 2000; Staeheli, 2010; Watson, 2006). As Mouffe (2005) puts it, “instead of trying to design the institutions which, through supposedly ‘impartial’ procedures, would reconcile all conflicting interests and values, the task for democratic theorists and politicians should be to envisage the creation of a vibrant ‘agonistic’ public sphere of contestation where different hegemonic political projects can be confronted” (p. 3). That is, people and activities ought to go on side by side in public places, allowing for exposure and interaction among different kinds of people and their behaviors. A different aspect of agonism is that in public space we learn everyday forms of democracy through the exposure of different kinds of people to one another (Carr, et al., 1992; Low 2006; Low, Taplin & Scheld 2005). Thus, part of what makes places public is that these are “places in which a range of people can interact with other people they don’t necessarily know, and in which they can engage in a range of public and private activities” (Shepard and Smithsimon, 2011, p. 18). For thinkers in this vein, public space allows and encourages us to negotiate difference, both on interpersonal (exposure) and group levels, by working out competing claims in real time.

All of these variations on democratic practice in public spaces occur in our cities every day. For many, the right to participate in the ways that are named here (and others), or to struggle for that right, are derived, to some extent, from the ideal that citizens in a democracy are the putative owners of public spaces.
**State ownership**

This leads to the second ideal, state ownership. In a democracy, state ownership suggests that citizens (as taxpayers) own the space through state regimes of property and management and, therefore have a voice in the larger decision making processes regarding public space. Thus, those protected by the state are entitled to some land that is commonly held outside of the market for common use; this category of people includes, in addition to adult citizens, residents, children, denizens, residents and visitors. These spaces are subject to some level of democratic participation in site selection, design and regulation. This means, for example, that a local group can lobby the city for a park or recreation center, or maintenance and upgrades to an existing site, and that there are meaningful conduits of access to power through which to do so. Finally, the behaviors permitted in these sites—temporal regulations like curfews, and rules posted—could be subject to some process of democratic review.

One particular trouble with the model of requisite state ownership model is that it can lead to the conflation of the public with the state (Newman and Clarke, 2009; Smith and Low, 2006), leaving little room for dissent, and the easy imposition of surveillance and policing. It can also lead to the inverse notion, that non-state spaces are not required to allow popular access in the same way as the state; one example is the dispute over political activity (such as union action) at a privately owned shopping center. This conflation between public and state can also limit the popular imagination, or have a chilling effect, in regards to public democratic practice.

The question of ownership also brings up the privatization of public spaces in North America today (Boyer, 1992; Katz, 2006; Miller, 2007; Mitchell, 2003; Sorkin, 1992; Swyngedouw, 2004; Ward, 2007). The central query in these discussions is whether non-state,
extra-state, or quasi-state formations can offer the same kind of accountability in acquisition, budgeting, maintenance and universal access in urban public spaces as the municipal state, with its putatively penetrable bureaucracy and popularly elected officials. Can organizations that operate with a profit motive (or adjuncts of those) make decisions that keep the public good at the center of their mission? If not, what justifies them as trustees of spaces belonging to the public? That said, the actual provenance of many of our public spaces—from libraries to mass transit—do not belie a ‘pure’ state form of ownership and operations. Many were developed by private industry or philanthropic organizations, and only later brought under the control of the state.

**Access**

The above ideals—democratic practice and state ownership—imply universal access, the notion that public spaces are non-exclusionary. As Carr et al. (1992) put it, *"Democratic spaces protect the rights of user groups. They are accessible to all groups and provide for freedom of action but also for temporary claim and ownership"* (pp. 19 - 20). While many large sub-sets of political and social units exist in any given territory, ‘the public’ supersedes all of these, and includes a putative everyone – all citizens, all residents, all taxpayers, all constituents – and more. But, of course, no category includes everyone; in addition to those who are left out, sometimes people (or groups) exclude themselves (or opt out) on the basis of everyone else being able to participate. Further, as Fraser (1990) notes, from the inception of the public as a mode of socio-political organization, there have always existed “subaltern counterpublics” which “emerge in response to exclusions within dominant publics” (p. 67). Keeping all of these
counterweights in mind, I break down the concept of access, more specifically, into supply, distribution, and belonging.

First, the question of supply: is there enough to go around? Although space is a finite resource, land ownership can be legislated to make an equitable supply possible, i.e. through the designation of public lands in perpetuity (through land trusts and other mechanisms), through easements on development, or simply through the establishment of parks or plazas. Many formulas have been developed for how much open space residents of a city need per person, and these can be established in a number of ways. Assuming that there could be ‘enough’ public space for everyone, we can then take a topographical approach (Iveson, 2007), in which access is a matter of even distribution. If we consider access to public space a question of environmental justice (Sze, 2007; Taylor, Floyd, Whit-Glover, & Brooks, 2007; Wolch, Wilson, & Fehrenbach, 2005), then we might aspire to a city in which public spaces were evenly distributed, so that if we were to color in the public spaces on a map, we would find that all residential neighborhoods are adjacent to public spaces of similar size and quality. This ideal of even distribution can be expanded to include transportation that allows ease of access, particularly for spaces of which there are fewer, a swimming pool being a good example.

But beyond supply and distribution, access also might include belonging, making it a positive—as opposed to a universal or neutral—quality. Staeheli and Mitchell (2008) explain that access “is not a simple matter of a space being open or closed at a given time... it is also a matter of how one enters a space, even if not physically barred from it” (Staeheli and Mitchell, 2008, p. 116). This quality describes both the ways in which people are made to feel that the space does or does not belong to them—through rules posted, permits required, or aesthetic
symbols of social class or group—and the ways in which the people feel that they belong to the space. Positive belonging includes processes of inclusion, such as regular public hearings, or equitable provision of safe spaces. It also means freedom from excessive policing, through rule or custom, by groups ranging from state police to private security forces to local organizations, who might target certain classes or groups of people. Un-belonging can also result from non-state or extra-state ownership of public spaces, including conservancies and public-private partnerships. The other side of positive belonging as access is that public spaces belong to their users in some capacity, through the mechanisms of social membership. To say that a municipal public space belongs to its users means not only that they have paid for it through tax dollars but also that they feel that their immediate and broad needs are being served.

In the tension between ideals I present here—democratic practice, state ownership and access—exist the struggles over what it means for space to be public. These overlapping frames are multiple, not binary, and each is enacted in a variety of ways. Also, although often interdependent, enactment of one can limit others; for example, state ownership can limit democratic practice. Each also exists on a gradient so that, for instance definition of access that doesn’t take a meaningful distribution of public space into account can offer public spaces to ‘everyone,’ while limiting people’s actual opportunity to enjoy the spaces. Finally, to think about the nature of belonging in public space is to consider more than equal distribution, but rather a more just notion of what access means.

In order to understand the programs of teaching, building and regulating that have gone into the municipal bathing project, I examine the changes in the ideals around them at different moments. A combination of contemporary and historical sources elucidates this project, all
inside of an ethnographic framework, in which I examine how meaning has been both imposed and derived from the public spaces of bathing in the city over time.

**Methods**

I divided research for *The Amphibious Public* into three parts: archival research in New York City since 1870, including municipal records, other local archives, newspaper sources, and secondary histories; observation (and some participation) with the Harlem Honeys and Bears, an African-American senior citizen synchronized swim team; and comparative ethnography of outdoor pools in the summer, including extended participant observation at Kosciuszko Pool and McCarren Pool in Brooklyn, as well as interviews with Parks Department officials.

**How I think about my methods**

In setting out to answer the original question for this project—*how does the municipal pool work and what work does it do?*—I had in mind a largely contemporary ethnography with some archival components. But as I visited more kinds of physical spaces called ‘public pool,’ and engaged with more sources about the history of bathing spaces that had produced contemporary public pools, I found that this system was made up of parts that, while alike in type and name—pool, bath, public—were often disparate in program or structure. Different trends in municipal bathing have fashioned structures whose various physical forms and modes of governance have converged and diverged repeatedly over time. The river bath (originated 1870), for example, was more like today’s outdoor pool in its structure than the bathhouse that
came after it (originated 1901) in terms of everyday play and swimming lessons, but, like the bathhouse, its official social goals were more closely tied to hygiene.

And while tying together the many sets of data that I gathered—archival documents, field notes, and (sometimes contradictory) secondary histories—was often an unwieldy task, what has resulted is what I will call a historical ethno-geography of the pools. Historical geography is interested in how spaces, especially of human settlement, have changed over time; human geography is concerned with how people interact with their environments and produce new kinds of places; ethnography is the study of how people develop cultural systems in order to make meaning. Sauer (1963) sees these as a whole scholarly exercise:

Let no one consider that historical geography can be content with what is found in archive and library. It calls, in addition, for exacting fieldwork. One of the first steps is the ability to read the documents in the field. Take into the field, for instance, an account of an area written long ago and compare the places and their activities with the present. (p. 367)

I have endeavored to produce the kind of historical geography that Sauer describes here, in combination with ethnographic methods (Becker, 2007; Burawoy, 1991; Geertz, 1973).

Influenced by the inductive reasoning of the extended case method (Burawoy, 1991), I saw my research grow and change as archival sources pointed me in directions I would not have seen without taking a long historical epoch,\(^\text{11}\) while contemporary participant observation put me in the water beside my subjects in order to start compiling observations. As Burawoy notes, the extended case method “attempts to elaborate the effects of the ‘macro’”—in this case imaginaries of ‘the public’ and ‘health’ or ‘wellness’—“on the ‘micro’” or particular (p. 9).

Additionally, this method looks for the anomaly, the thing that ought not occur or exist, but

\(^{11}\) The 142-year time period had its own challenges. I often had to sacrifice depth to breadth in order to tell a whole story. Also, some archives that I discovered late in the process are still subjects for future investigation.
does. Through changes in structure and purpose, the municipal bathing project has persisted over 150 years, reworking notions of what ‘public’ means, as the ideals and rules of what belongs in public space, and who gets to decide, are contested at many scales of power.

Archival research

In the archives, I looked for the story of municipal governance processes that determined the outcomes of the municipal bathing project—decisions to build, maintain or close down particular structures or sets of structures, funding schemes, collaboration or refusal to collaborate with non- or extra-governmental organizations—as well as representations of those processes in internal correspondence, and in the media. At what moments did the guiding rationale for building, teaching or regulating change? What does the existence of a physical structure—a pool, a bathhouse—allow or constrain in the imagination of builders and users once it was already built?

As Stoler (2009) offers, “in treating archival documents not as the historical ballast to ethnography, but as a charged site of it,” we can “move away from treating the archives as an extractive exercise to an ethnographic one” (p. 47). With the archive as a site of ethnography, I came to understand how agents of the state, and the public, have attempted to make meaning through municipal bathing over time, through what they have built, how they have talked about what they have built, and the ways in which they recorded those successes and disputes for posterity. That is to say, the ways that municipalities and their departments talk about themselves, and about the publics that they purport to serve, can tell us a great deal about the social world they saw themselves, and their constituents, occupying. This method explores not
only the ‘facts’ or chronology, but also how conversations between and among politicians, planners, citizen groups, charity organizations, architects, engineers, and the press inflected these large, capital-intensive projects. I also noted where the record of the municipal archive diminished, or became the archive of a different kind of organization that went by the same name.12

Contemporary ethnographic methods included participant observation (including recording field notes), recording and transcribing interviews, and occasional drawing and mapping. The purpose here was to observe the everyday realities that, amalgamated over time, demonstrate how competing ideals and demands get puzzled out in the context of municipal infrastructure that has both a complicated bureaucracy and a long history. In my research with the Harlem Honeys and Bears, I was able to observe a group that coherent in their age, racial identity and practice (though these, too, varied) and recognized their own group-ness, tied to the Recreation Center at 134th street, and the structures around it. Participant observation at the outdoor pools in the summer, however, offered very little coherence in terms of the specific people I encountered on each visit, and was much more an ethnography of space and place (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga, 2003). In turn, I struggle to both make sense of the outdoor pool, and to not attribute coherence to a cultural system only because it exists in bounded space. In contemporary participant observation I also demonstrate what belonging does or does not look like in public space. In terms of social and environmental justice, a discourse of ‘rights’ often surrounds the fight for more or better public space (Wolch et al., 2007), with maps and quantitative data as evidence of show uneven patterns of distribution and access;

12 Archival sources can be found in Appendix D.
perhaps belonging, better demonstrated through ethnographic methods, is its qualitative counterpart.

The sum of these methods is a historical ethno-geography, an endeavor to understand the competing meaning-makings going on across the putatively universal type that today is the pool. As I analyze bodies of archival material, I consider them ethnographically—how might meaning be derived by what is included and excluded in the archive itself? What can the categories in the archive tell us? And as I conduct ethnography, the long story of the municipal bathing project must be part of the story I have in mind (even if not always for the subjects at the present moment.)

**Contemporary ethnography**

**I. Harlem Honeys and Bears**

Ethnographic research with the Harlem Honeys and Bears (HHBs) began in February 2012, and continued for the next eight months. During this period, I visited the group at Hansborough pool most Monday mornings (at least 26 times) for about two hours each time, and more often in the time leading up to their Harlem Week performance at the pool on August 18, 2012.\(^{13}\) Sometimes I got in the water and swam laps or just hung out, but more often I sat and talked with group members on the sidelines, and observed their practice. I also attended events that group members sponsored or participated in, including a promotional event at Jackie Robinson Pool in Harlem for the Parks Department’s new (as of 2012) summer Senior Swim program (special morning hours at the outdoor pools devoted only to seniors); a

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\(^{13}\) Harlem week is a celebration of (mostly) Black culture in Harlem, which includes a large multi-day street fair, as well events sponsored by various community groups in Harlem for a week each May.
celebration honoring Black women leaders in Harlem at the Hansborough recreation center gym; and the HHBs performance celebrating the life of Whitney Houston, as part of the Harlem Week festivities. In my last months with them, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 members of the team, and others, who volunteered to speak with me, on the topics of swimming, the Hansborough pool, and popular and personal ideas about Black swimmers. Interviews lasted between fifteen minutes and one hour. I transcribed the interviews myself, and internally coded them to find categories for analysis.

II. Outdoor Pools, Brooklyn

Comparative participant observation at the McCarren and Kosciuszko outdoor pools examines how everyday life operates at the outdoor pools in the present day. I chose these pools because they come from two different pool-building boom eras in Brooklyn. Only about 2.5 miles apart from one another, the two neighborhoods—Bedford-Stuyvesant and Williamsburg—are quite different in terms of their demographics, wealth, and neighborhood change in rapidly gentrifying Brooklyn.

Kosciuszko Pool, in Bedford-Stuyvesant—a large, poor, mostly African-American neighborhood, was built in 1970, with plans by the company of renowned architect Morris Lapidus. Many of the original play elements, including extensive fountain, sprinkler, and slide structures, made of cement, do not function. Today, the pool attracts a largely young (10 – 25), mostly African-American crowd from the surrounding neighborhood, though gentrification is bringing some changes to the demographic of both the neighborhood and the pool, as more
white families move in. The pool is not particularly well maintained, and generally attracts little—if any—media attention.

McCarren Pool in Williamsburg opened in the 1936 WPA pools boom, but was shuttered in 1984 as a result of physical plant deterioration, neighborhood violence,\(^{14}\) and city budget shortfalls (Dailey, 2012). Various attempts to re-open in the pool in the 1980s and 90s were thwarted by citizen groups, and the derelict pool became the site for covert, and eventually city-permitted, performances of music and dance. Beginning in 2010, the pool and adjoining bathhouse\(^ {15}\) underwent a $50 million renovation, and it was re-opened as a pool in July 2012, to much fanfare. A series of incidents in the weeks after the pool’s opening—including fistfights between patrons (not uncommon at other municipal pools) and an assault on a police officer—attracted a great deal of media attention and subsequent heavy policing throughout the summer. This produced an archive of news and blog articles that I followed closely.

In addition to participant observation, I interviewed Parks Department administrators regarding the pools, and the broad program of aquatics at the Parks department. I had a somewhat difficult time getting permission for interviews, and was often bounced back to the press office by those I asked to interview, or those administrators. I was able to complete six interviews regarding different aspects of the everyday maintenance and governance of the Pools from officials in central administration as well as Brooklyn and the Bronx.

\(^{14}\) According to Chronopoulos (2013), “beginning in the early 1970s, the McCarren Pool became a contested site because the racial background of its users changed. Latinos and African Americans, who had been moving in large numbers to parts of Brooklyn, started to use the pool. In reaction, the white ethnics of Greenpoint and Williamsburg discontinued their use of the pool and sought to undermine its existence. They eventually succeeded in shutting the pool down and keeping it inoperable for more than two decades” (p. 105).

\(^{15}\) While the pool remained free, the original bathhouse was converted into an indoor recreation center with gyms, weight rooms, etc., with a membership fee of $150/year, and semi-outdoor locker rooms were added to the exterior walls of the original building.
A note on method: ethnography in my underpants

While conducting ethnographic research, I spent a fair amount of time poolside, at the McCarren and Bed-Stuy pools, both in the water and on the deck, observing. At both sites, I wore a two-piece bathing suit that is fairly modest unless you consider that it is, perhaps, immodest to wear what is would otherwise be considered underwear while talking to people you just met. (When I occasionally swam with the Harlem Honeys and Bears, I wore a one-piece racing suit, which is what they wear.) Because I was going to be interacting with strangers at the municipal pools—other patrons, Parks Enforcement Police (PEP) officers, NYPD officers, various Parks Department employees—I could have opted to wear my racing suit at all times, which covers me more fully. But, to my mind, that didn’t make sense because I would have seemed like a person who was at the pool to participate in lap swimming or sport (which I was not) rather than to splash and sunbathe and enjoy, which is what most people do, and what interested me.

In her work on embodied methodologies, Sara Oerton (2001) brings up the problem of "how to employ epistemological and methodological protocols which centre and ground the researching body, thereby preventing it from simply dissolving or disappearing from the frame" (p. 316). My body is white, able, relatively thin, distinctly female, often hairless, without marks or scars (besides some freckles) on the skin. With these attributes, I have the privilege of occupying the ‘blank’ space of dominant subjectivity. The attention I attract is likely to be complimentary, or if it is overtly sexual, I am generally able to ignore it; if it persists, and I complain, I will likely be taken seriously by Parks staff. Sometimes I stood out; in my frequent
visits to Kosciuzko pool, I was often motioned or escorted towards the lap swim area, separate from the main splashing area of the pool, by lifeguards and Parks security, as I wandered around the water’s edge looking for a good vantage to watch the action in the main part of the pool. While some Black patrons were there to swim laps, white adults without children were most often found in the lap-swimming area, and I was assumed to be among these. Still, I wouldn’t count this as harassment or discrimination.

The protocols that I employed to “center and ground” my own researching body, per Oerton’s admonishment, included taking careful field notes on my own practices of body hair removal, paying close attention to the practices of dressing and undressing in locker rooms, dressing purposefully like those around me, and getting in the water along with other swimmers in the places I observed. This is to say: I tried to experience the pool just as the majority of the pool-goers I observed, while being hyper-aware of how to fit in – a contradiction in itself. At the same time, I had to behave like it was completely normal, for instance, to stand on a pool deck in my two small pieces of bathing suit, talking to a fully dressed police officer for half an hour at a time. Both of us had to behave as if I were fully clothed. This is a kind of pretending that goes on at the pool all of the time.

Chapter overview

In the dissertation that follows, I demonstrate how the municipal bathing project has deployed public infrastructure to produce a social life, which convenes ideas about health and wellness, hygiene and recreation, both from the standpoint of the elites and from everyday users – the corporeal public. I then go on to elaborate on how those rationales have been
reworked over time as the physical structures of the pools and baths persisted in the landscape. Often, sites amalgamate multiple meanings and ideals, or shed and adopt different imaginaries in different periods.

The data that I gathered through the combination of archival and ethnographic research illustrates the municipal bathing project over time. Each chapter, in the framework of building, teaching and regulating, emphasizes a particular contest over what spaces for social life and who they are for, and to what end. I combine archival and contemporary evidence as pieces of a whole historical ethno-geography of the workings of actually existing public spaces. Following Cranz’s (1982) history of the design and politics of urban parks in the United States, I tell a story of how ideas about wellness and the body transform as they relate to and produce public space. Rather than a chronology, I use themes in each chapter to think through how ideas with the same names—health, safety, wellness, propriety—have been reconfigured in and through related spaces over time, and how the spaces have transformed the ideas as well. A history of infrastructural advances in municipal bathing beginning in 1870, Chapter Two provides a chronology for the rest of the dissertation, but does not function simply as a contextual piece. Extant historical literature covers a broad social history of public pools in the United States, as mentioned above. To these histories, I contribute theorizations of public space, drawing out some of the specific conflicts that have challenged what it means to belong in and to public spaces. Two main points underpin this chapter: first, the municipal bathing project always intervenes in a landscape of already-existing bathing spaces; and second, the shift between kinds of bathing projects—river baths and indoor baths, or indoor baths and pools—was never made in a complete movement.
The chapter opens with an overview of bathing culture in the mid-19th century, as microbial understandings of disease and the rise of centralized urban planning converged in a project of environmentally based public health. I then describe four building booms. First, the decision of the City to sink river baths into the East and Hudson rivers in 1870, a project that would last through the 1940s in spite of pollution in the rivers and the rise of indoor baths. Second, indoor municipal bathhouses opened in 1901, a project that highlighted tension between the reform and state agenda of social control of the poor through strict regimens of time and comportment, as well as the baths’ tremendous popularity. Third, I describe the eleven grand pools opened by Parks Commissioner Robert Moses in the summer of 1936, often called the “WPA Pools” for the federal funding that made them possible. Finally, I consider the large and varied pools program under Mayor Lindsay, beginning in the late 1960s, built largely as an attempt to remedy the conditions that the administration feared would bring violent uprisings to the poorest neighborhoods of New York City.

Chapter Three enters into the theme of regulation, dealing questions of public entitlement. In this chapter, the subject of user fees (or nominal fees, as they are sometimes called) helps to call into question the nature of ‘publicness’ at the pool, focusing on the ability of poor people to avail themselves of the city’s shared spaces. At certain times, patrons have paid to enter New York’s outdoor pools, but not the indoor, and at other times just the opposite. I consider these fees in terms of the moral framework that they attempt to impose, as well as the official message, often broadcast, that they are required to offset the Parks Department budget.
A central conflict in this chapter, pulled from the Parks Department archive from the late 1930s and early 40s (but which extended through the 1960s), is over a free period for children that was offered on weekday mornings, while the rest of the time both children and adults paid an entry fee. Causing particular upset to the Parks officials was a group of children who would come for the free period and then get back in line to pay their fee for the second half of the day. This conflict raises questions of how time is regulated in space in order to separate classes of people from one another. This chapter also examines the rise in fees for recreation centers across the city since the 1990s. Once again, based on an official line about balancing the City budget, the fees for recreation centers were introduced and have been doubled twice, each time leading to a significant drop in membership. The repeated dispute over fees raises the question of what they are for, and what kind of public they produce.

Chapter Four makes the transition from regulation to teaching. Here, I consider the history of state sponsored swimming lessons in order to get at the question of what learning to swim is for, what knowing how to swim means both physically and symbolically, and who swim lessons have suited at different periods. While swim lessons were a main feature of programming in the river baths from the 1870s on, the program of swim lessons across the city—through Parks, through the Department of Education, and through various private institutions—has shifted in popularity and responsibility over the course of the municipal bathing project. This chapter looks at the ways that knowing how to swim is or is not part of the public mandate of the pools in different periods. The chapter closes with an examination of the deeply racialized divide in swimming ability and drowning in the United States today, and the
current New York City program to teach second graders rudimentary swimming techniques, Swim for Life.

Chapter five addresses a different side of regulation – the interaction of bodies. Here, I consider the ways that the pool is constructed as a risky place, through the changes in the mores of gender relations over time, and through the production of sex and sexuality, often along racial and class lines. These themes are played out in a story from the mid-1990s in which, over a number of years, a series of group sexual assaults called ‘whirlpools’ took place at outdoor municipal pools in the summer. In this account, I consider how the story was played out in the media, and official reactions differed.

Chapter six is an ethnography of the Harlem Honeys and Bears, an all-African American Senior Citizen synchronized swim team that practiced at the Hansborough Pool at 135th street in Harlem, until the pool was closed for renovations in Fall, 2012. In addition to regular swim practice, the team supports a swim culture for seniors and others at Hansborough pool. This chapter shows how free or cheap access to the infrastructure for municipal bathing has provided an excluded population (Black Seniors) the opportunity to decide for themselves what it means to have a strong, healthy body, and to provide support for those qualities in their community. And how a system of benign neglect has, to some extent, turned the paradigms of teaching and regulating on their heads.

In Chapter Seven, the conclusion, I return to some of the questions I asked in the dissertation proposal in order to see how effectively I have answered them through the research and analysis presented here. I also ask whether or not these are good or useful
questions, and why, and I open up the list of questions that I have, now that I have completed what I consider to be the first part of my research.

The conclusion also includes a plan for future investigations, focusing on archival materials I would like to gather about (1) the decision to stop charging admission fees for the outdoor pools at some point in the 1980s, and (2) the relationship of the Board of Education to other agents of municipal bathing, particularly the Department of Parks—both in its decision to build pools in schools and instruct swimming, and its decision to quit the (comprehensive) swim business at some point in the late 1960s.

In the dissertation that follows, I tell the story of state provision of places that are multiple in character: in the ideas they hope to promote, in the publics they produce, in the shifts they undergo. To tell the story of a whole system such as this is to attribute to it a kind of singularity, to hold together with basting stitches what does not always function as a unity. But the attempt to find coherence in such a system is to see the agents, the named and the anonymous, and their actions. It is to see what might be built, and where the pitfalls are in building, and to consider better, more fulfilling outcomes for an urban future.
Chapter Two: Building History

The project of building river baths, municipal bathhouses and swimming pools arrived in American cities in different orders and on different timelines. New York City was late to provide indoor municipal baths for personal cleanliness, having built first indoor public bath in 1901\(^{16}\) by which time Chicago already had a system of 50 baths running (Glassberg, 1979, p. 12).\(^{17}\) Many European cities were also well equipped with indoor municipal bathhouses by the late 19\(^{th}\) century, and were cited by scholars of public health in North America, as well as by charity organizations, as a model for good bathing policy (Hamilton, et al., 1895). At this time, the language of ‘catching up’ with other cities of similar stature, both in Europe and in North America, was quite common.\(^1\) This ideal was buttressed, in the campaign for indoor bathhouses with exhortations such as, “New York should no longer be left behind in the appliances of civilized cities for the cleanliness and comfort of its inhabitants outside of their homes” (“For Cleanliness and Comfort,” September 22, 1895).

This chapter tells the story of the decisions on the part of different arms of the government of the City of New York—the Health Department, the Mayor’s office, Borough Presidents’ offices, the Department of Parks—to build baths and pools over the period of 1870 – 2012, influenced sometimes by elite philanthropic and reform organizations, at other times

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16 While 1901 is the given date for the Rivington Street municipal bath in Renner (2008, p. 11) and Wiltse (2007, p. 35) quoting Williams (1991, p. 52), a New York Times article from July 2, 1904 announces, “The first of a series of public baths, to be erected and maintained at the city’s expense, was opened last evening with appropriate exercise in William H. Seward Park...”

17 Strasser (1996) demonstrates how variable the impetus for the municipal bathing project was in various North American cities: “New York owed its baths to tenacious reformers and the state legislature, Boston to a mayor who believed in public baths. In Baltimore, a major philanthropist donated public bath buildings for the city to operate. Women activists in Chicago were responsible for creating small neighborhood baths, quite unlike the marble monuments to be found in other cities. Philadelphia established a system of municipal outdoor swimming pools for summer use, but left year-round baths to private charity” (p. 464).
by citizens and citizen organizations. While this chronology does provide the basis for other explanations, it is especially meant to unpack the ways that the state both governs and produces corporeal public life through projects of material changes to the environment.

Two ideas undergird this telling of the history of the municipal bathing project as an infrastructural project: first, that public bathing infrastructure was not invented whole cloth, but was repeatedly introduced into a wider ecosystem of private bathing – both in people’s homes and at commercial establishments; and, second, that the shifts between kinds of bathing projects (river baths and indoor baths, indoor baths and swimming pools) were never clean and complete, but rather ran up against one another and overlapped, sometimes at cross purposes, having to do with both social agendas and government structures.

First, the municipal bathing project in New York has always intervened in a network of extant bathing spaces that already existed in at least two settings, both of which are called ‘private,’ but describe different characteristics. On one hand, public is opposed to the private indoor home plumbing that introduced “modesty and privacy unknown to earlier social norms” (Maldonado and Cullars, 1991, p. 40) which, in New York, became broadly available to the middle and upper classes in 1842 with the opening of the Croton Aqueduct (Renner, 2008).\textsuperscript{18} The public bath’s other opposite is privately owned and managed communal bathing spaces, in which people bathed together socially for a fee, and which were often divided by neighborhood and ethnic loyalties, and did not purport to welcome ‘everybody’. In the decades that the

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\textsuperscript{18} Illich (1986) explains, "unlike their contemporaries in Europe, the majority of US cities were built out of wood. The large fires at the beginning of the century led to demands for water to be used in fire fighting. By 1860 some 140 waterworks had been constructed. Technical breakthroughs facilitated these projects ... American cities that built waterworks for the prime purpose of firefighting were, from the beginning, concerned with water pressure, and the combination of the new iron pipes with available water pressure made it logical to deliver water right into homes" (p. 71).
municipal river baths and indoor bathhouses were built, from 1870 to 1925, a social bathing landscape of private river baths, Russian and Turkish baths, mikvehs, private neighborhood baths, charity baths and YMCA pools already flourished. Bathhouses for many kinds of social life were an integral part of the social scene at Coney Island, and some baths had become ‘favorite places,’ integral to gay life in the city (Chauncey, 1994).

Second: the shifts between kinds of bathing structures were never made in a complete, unified movement. When municipal river baths were installed in 1870, putatively to protect people from drowning, children continued to swim in the rivers around New York well into the 1940s. It might seem intuitive that demand for municipal bathing places diminished when “New York’s Model Tenement House Reform Law of 1901, though not requiring bathing facilities, mandated that builders provide water for each floor (later amended to each apartment) in a tenement” (Glassberg, 1979, p. 18). However, many citizens who lived in cold water flats, or who wanted a bit more privacy than the communal tenement bathroom or the home kitchen allowed, continued to flock to the public baths through the 1940s; the last municipal bathhouse was in use until 1975. This overlap in kinds of bathing places was due both to the availability of existing structures in the landscape, and to people’s desire to hold on to the provisions that they had grown accustomed to. It also points to layers of different kinds of needs that coexist in a city of changing technologies and norms for hygiene. Although the municipal bathing project largely succeeded in separating certain kinds of functions from one another that had previously coexisted at the riverbank—cleaning, socializing, play—those functions were reconfigured around particular types of physical structures.
In this chapter, I tell the story of building baths and pools from archival data, which largely betrays this story from the viewpoint of government and elites as they made decisions about the direction of the municipal bathing project. I also employ a number of secondary sources, some of which oppose one another (both in facts and interpretation), which I attempt to parse. I first offer some background for the initiation of enclosed social bathing in Western cities in the mid to late 19th century. Following that, I break up the bathing project into four historical periods, marked by the major project of the period: river baths from 1870, indoor bath houses from 1901, outdoor pools from 1936, and outdoor pools 1968 - 1972. I do this for the benefit of chronological place-marking, while noting that each period in fact encompassed a variety of types of bathing structures to fulfill different needs and ideals. Therefore these separations in time mark the rise of particular kinds of thinking and building about infrastructure for bathing, but not the whole life cycle of any part of the project. These incomplete shifts showcase the tendency of infrastructure to persist in the urban landscape, and for the persistence of physical structures to set political will and popular demand in motion for maintaining them, even as technologies and political capacities change. Understanding the interplay between and among these helps us to understand the multiplicity of ideas surrounding the corporeal public that the state both produces and attends to.

Background: Bathing in the Late-19th Century and the reform imagination

Throughout the 19th century, many aspects of what we now think of as basic personal hygiene practices in Western cities, such as washing the whole body regularly with soap, were being socially negotiated, as the germ theory of disease came to replace old theories of
infection and illness, such as miasma and bodily humors, in the medical establishment (Rosen, 1993). Indeed, the idea that personal hygiene should exist at all—that cleanliness of person is tied to health, for which each person is responsible—was a fairly new idea. At the same time, the relationship of population-level health to elements of the urban environment was also being hashed out, as part of a larger project of city planning, a main element of which was the universal provision of water and sewerage (Gandy, 2004).

In addition to changes in the urban environment based upon advances in the scientific understanding of microbes—especially provision of water and sewerage—particular emphasis came to be placed on frequency of bathing, as part of a program of healthy living.

Fig. 2.1: Ad for Angell’s Turkish Baths, including sun and electric bathing.
Source: New York Historical Society (Slimmins, 1872)

Hydrotherapy—the application of, or dunking in, water of various temperatures and mineral

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19 Even before the exact microbial agents of disease were well understood, a project of Public Health was underway in New York City, with a great administrative push through the establishment of the Metropolitan Board of Health on March 5, 1866 (Rosen, 1993, p. 221).
contents—was widely regarded a tonic for general good hygiene, and particularly as a cure for a range of women’s health issues (Cayleff, 1987; Gordon and Inglis, 2009; Scott, 1939, Weiss, 1967).\footnote{20 Heliotherapy, or sunbathing, was often included in this regimen as well, as was air bathing. From a 1908 guide to bathing: \"Air bathing\" signifies bathing in the open air, or, in other words, the exposure of the unclothed body to the air, generally in connection with light gymnastic or air-breathing exercises or with Swedish movements or sometimes with walking, jumping and running. Sun baths are baths in which the nude or partly nude body is exposed to the beneficial action of the light rays of the sun; theses are usually taken without bodily exercise, and give a higher effect than air baths\" (Gerhard, 1908, p. 215).} Hydrotherapy was not a fringe practice – rather, it had direct ties to the promotion of bathing as a public health mission. Dr. Simon Baruch, one of the biggest advocates for municipal bathhouse provision in New York, published the first treatise in English on the subject in 1898: *The principles and Practice of Hydrotherapy, A Guide to the Application of Water in Disease* (Weiss, 1967, p. 65).

The reform agenda for provision of municipal bathing facilities—which would result first in the river baths (1870) and second, in the program of indoor bathhouses (1901)—arose in the mid-19th century, and was based upon an impulse to instruct poor residents of the city, chiefly immigrant populations, in ‘the bathing habit’ for reasons of both public health and symbolic cleansing. However, this was not necessarily a habit that all poor immigrants lacked, nor that middle and upper class people had universally adopted already. While Croton aqueduct water piped into homes first became available in 1842 (Renner, 2008), regular bathing took some time to catch on for everyone, and the meaning of cleanliness was variable. As well, ‘immigrants’ were coming to the United States from all parts of Europe at a tremendous rate, and were not a homogeneous group in terms of customs (hygienic and otherwise) nor class. Hoy (1995) describes how “some took advantage of public baths built in America's largest cities at the turn of the century; but southern and eastern Europeans, who were unaccustomed to
bathing year-round, showed no great enthusiasm for them, except on hot summer days” (p. 116).

At the same time, in an 1871 pamphlet advertising the Russian (Marble) Vapor baths, an upper-class commercial bathing establishment, bathing for cleanliness is still being ‘pitched’ to potential patrons:

It is doing a great deal, persons may think, to wash every day the face and hands, the parts which, being uncovered, are visible to every one; but to cleanse thoroughly the rest of the body, but once a week, is deemed hardly worth the trouble. Every Sunday we put on clean, fresh clothing, but to clean and purify every Sunday the natural garments which envelop the whole body - our skin - is for the majority of persons, too inconvenient a matter. (Capes, 1871, p.4)

And as late as 1910, the regular use of soap for personal health was still being debated in the newspaper, with one commentator noting, “In a daily bath soap is unnecessary. It should only be applied carefully at the end of the day to those portions of the skin that have been exposed to the atmosphere. This daily use of soap removes the healthy, oily substances and renders the skin too dry for health” (“The Problem of Bathing,” January 2, 1910).

But despite the differences over what ‘clean’ meant among all classes, the movement to promote bathing through municipal infrastructure primarily focused on the bodies of the poorest New Yorkers. This was primarily a project of public health practitioners and social reformers, for whom analogies between notions of ‘cleaning’ and ‘civilizing’ the immigrant were quite common.21 When the shower, or ‘rain bath,’ came in, it was lauded for more than just its efficiency: “More bathers can be accommodated in a given time, and their cost is less than the tub plan.... Considering the moral benefit of clean bodies to the cramped lives of the

21 For secondary literature exists on the first indoor baths and their social goals, see: An, 2005; Crook, 2006; Gutman, 2008; Porter, 1999; Smith, 2007; Strasser, 1996; Tesh, 1998; Verbrugge, 1983; Wilkie, 1986; Wiltse, 2007.
very poor, this matter presents a means of charity which money may well endorse” (“The Value
of the Rain Bath,” July 22, 1894, emphasis added). Renner (2008) offers:

Part of the draw of the bath was its unique power to actualize a metaphor:
bathing literally removes and sanitizes the unwanted elements from the body. The leap from visualizing bathing as purging physical substances to eliminating vice and foreignism was a seductive jump that reduced the complex troubles of urban poverty to manageable, everyday problems; a little cleaning, and almost magically, the negative effects of industrialization would wash away. (p. 506)

That said, the ideals of the bathhouse reformers were varied and complex. In a 1908 publication, The Tenement House Problem, the authors do display the attitudes that Renner describes, offering cleanliness as the solution for ‘degeneracy’ (DeForest and Veiller, 1908, p. 54). At the same time, they are mindful of the ways that poor people are blamed for the habits that result from the poor physical conditions to which they are subject in their homes:

Experience has shown that in a tenement house containing a large number of families and without proper supervision, as is usually the case, common bathing facilities are not feasible. Once common bathing facilities in a tenement house fall into disuse for their proper purposes, they come into use for improper purposes, which often leads to the hasty and unwarranted conclusion that tenement house dwellers do not want to bathe. (p. 53)

Also inside of this discourse of tandem hygienic and moral education, tremendous contradictions emerged among politicians and public health officials regarding the populations they believed themselves to be serving. While an 1892 account in The Engineering Record promotes the culture of bathing in Europe—“in Russia, every village has its vapor bath, where the bather, after being steamed, is well scrubbed with soap and water”—a 1905 treatise on bathing demands that “the virtues of soap and water must be taught to myriads of foreigners such as those prudent Russian immigrants who sew their children up in their clothes at the first frost and leave them sewn up till spring” (Paine, 1905, p. 1). While the poorest immigrants were
caught in impoverished and cramped living conditions without even running water, in many cases, the reformers had to imagine them, to some extent as ‘not knowing’ how to bathe.

Children had a special place in the reform imagination, first as being impressionable to the bathing habit, second as the object of social control, and third as messengers of modern notions of cleanliness and hygiene. “Wretched homes have been completely transformed,” writes a commentator in 1896, “the beginning of better things being directly traceable to the sense of his ignoble environment which personal cleanliness aroused in the little reformer” (“The School Bath System,” May 17, 1896). To this end, many proposed that bath facilities be placed directly in school buildings, with dedicated time in the school week for hygiene education, and in some cases they were (“For Cleanliness and Comfort,” September 22, 1895; Gerhard, 1900). By 1909, twenty-five public schools housed baths, the majority of them in Manhattan and Brooklyn (Citizen’s Recreation Committee, 1909).

Concurrent with the municipal bathing project, the playground movement, which thrived in industrial cities like New York and Chicago from 1880 to 1920, (Cavallo, 1981; Cranz, 1982; Dargan and Zeitlin, 1990; Gagen, 2004; Lubove, 1962; Riess, 1989) was interested in “organized play, particularly team sports for adolescents,” which was seen as “an ideal means of integrating the young into the work rhythms and social demands of a dynamic and complex urban-industrial civilization” (Cavallo, 1981, p.2). The notion that programmed recreational infrastructure could have an impact on the social good was powerful. And these ways of thinking informed one another: in 1908 the Superintendent of the New York Public Schools stood up in front of the American Playground Association and declared that “the usefulness to the city in point of morality of the Carnegie public libraries was small compared with that which
would accrue from a comprehensive system of public baths” (“Baths Before Books,” September 12, 1908).

In the period from the opening of the Croton Aqueduct (1842) to the rise of the indoor municipal bathhouse (1901), the understanding of the relationship of disease to the built environment changed a great deal. While these changes in thinking were mobilized in the realm of infrastructure for hygiene, the provision of infrastructure for bathing was meant to influence moral conditioning as well, particularly among the poorest New Yorkers. Like other programs for social change, such as the playground movement, the role of children was central to these programs, but not exclusive. The sections that follow demonstrate the tensions between reform and other elite expectations for the municipal bathing project in different periods, often opposed to the desires of patrons.

**1870: River baths, or floating baths**

In summer of 1870, the Metropolitan Bathing Association of the City of New York sunk the first municipal baths in New York City into the East and Hudson rivers.
An 1871 newspaper article describes them: "Both baths are of the usual house-like model, and have a swimming area of eighty-five feet in length by sixty-five feet in width. They are each provided with sixty-eight dressing-rooms, have offices and rooms in an additional story, and are well lighted with gas for night bathing" ("Free Baths," June 22, 1871). Each could accommodate 4500 bathers each day, and patrons waited in long lines to use them. “A total of about twenty-seven floating pools” were built in the first years and “fifteen were still in existence in 1904 (Luehring, 1939, p. 20).22

The river baths, also known as floating baths, were the first piece of municipal infrastructure for social bathing: a physical and capital investment for health in the spaces of the city on the part of the municipal state. Symbolically, they indicated separation from the

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22 When the building project began slowly, with only two river baths built in the first six years, a commentator offered, “the average citizen... is inclined to regard the two free bathing houses as little better than two particularly hollow mockeries” ("River Bathing," June 29, 1876).
dangers of the riverbank, where many drowned. Various social consequences resulted from these structures, including the policing and control of working class male populations who had been swimming at the river’s edge until that time; opportunities for dedicated bathing time for women and girls; as well as swimming lessons for boys and girls.

These were not the first floating baths in the river: two or three privately owned floating baths already existed at the time the municipal river baths were constructed, having been built about thirty years prior (“Free Baths,” June 22, 1871). Other private river baths continued to be installed alongside the municipal baths; the space was leased from the Department of Docks at $150/month (“The Department of Docks,” May 29, 1874). As well, the river baths did not constitute a unified change in bathing practices around the city, and they were contested from different sides: on one hand, defiant riverbank swimming continued long after they were built. On the other, reformers also pushed to have them closed, and for indoor baths to replace them (though they were well attended through the 1920s, more than two decades after the indoor baths began construction).

In the year after the river baths were built, the Department of Public Works reported “They were used to their full capacity by that class of our population who are most in need of thorough periodical ablution - by people who have neither the opportunity to bathe at home nor the means to pay for the use of private bathing institutions” (Department of Public Works, 1872). In this interjection of public baths into municipal bathing landscapes, we see an example of how the ‘public’ of municipal bathing came to be, and is often conflated with, provision for

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23 Some were concerned that some of the private river baths were taking over prime riverfront space, which they leased from the Department of Docks cheaply, provided more amenities (such as hot water baths and showers), and turned a reasonably big profit, as a summer at one of these baths could see 20,000 bathers. Further, the private baths were built at half the cost of the city baths (“Opening of the Bathing Season,” June 13, 1874).
poor people, rather than the universal public that is often idealized. (This operation would extend into an attempt at separating the poorest children – those who couldn’t pay for admission to the outdoor pools – into a highly regimented free period. See Chapter Three.)

Important to consider here is that decades before the river baths, many New Yorkers—particularly working class men and boys—swam and played at the banks of the East and Hudson rivers (Wiltse, 2007, p. 14). (Even after a robust municipal bathing infrastructure was built, they would continue to do so well into the 20th Century, discussed below.) But the currents in the river were dangerous: “Alarmed by the number of deaths from drowning, which were averaging about one per day, in 1868 the Board of Health appointed a committee to investigate the subject” (Duffy, 1974, p. 44), which resulted in municipal construction of river baths. This, at least, was the official line.24

In addition to safety, the purpose of the river bath, officially, was to promote cleanliness, as well as structured swim lessons in some periods.25 Cooling was also a priority:

the slum streets pour a stream of haggard heat victims down toward the docks, East and West, to the floating baths. They are open at five in the morning to welcome such as these, the ragged and heavy-footed people who must work without sleep when a heat wave blisters the city. (Paine, 1905, p. 6)

Play and splashing were also prominent, if not on the official agenda, as we see in photos and engravings of the time.

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24 If we consider that the Learn to Swim initiative under Moses (1938) was started “as a public safety initiative, in response to the reported 400 drownings each year in New York City” (“Parks Swimming Pools,” 2014), then either river baths were not entirely effective in this goal, or that preventing drowning was not their central aim.

25 Swim lessons were offered by the Department of Education in many summers, for both boys and girls. This movement was buttressed by the New York City swim schools of Kate Bennett, a swim lesson pioneer, who promoted swimming among women (Bier, 2011). More on this in Chapter Four – Swimming Lessons.
But from another angle, the trade-off for a putative program of safety was a rise in surveillance, as the riverbanks became much more heavily policed (“River Bathing,” June 29, 1876; Bier, 2011). In his social history of swimming pools in American cities, *Contested Waters* (2007), historian Jeff Wiltse describes the construction of the floating baths as an attempt to rein in the riverbank-centered activities of working class men who, until that time, “created a plebian and masculine swimming culture that violated Victorian norms. They swam in the nude, they swore, they fought, and they evaded authority” (p. 9). Bathing sessions at the river baths, on the contrary, were highly limited, with time marked into half-hour sessions by the banging of a gong. These new systems of enforcement compelled boys and men to wait for hours in the hot sun for their short bathing period, at the threat of being clubbed and taken in by the police if they dared bathe naked at the riverbank (Riess, 1989). While safety was the given reason, the
anxiety over the exposure and visibility of the naked bodies of boys was central to the conflict and to the building project.

The boys themselves resisted this change, at times turning the crackdown into a cat and mouse game. In one instance, when an overzealous police officer attempted to arrest a group of boys who had been swimming naked at the riverbank, they escaped – but the officer took their clothes and locked them up in the police station. In retaliation, the boys flaunted their nakedness by sitting on the ropes of the pier: “passers-by were surprised when they saw the lads sitting in a row, one having on a hat, another an odd shoe, while a third rejoiced in the possession of a torn shirt” (“Bathing Under Difficulties,” August 5, 1879).

While some critics of the time remarked that the sight of naked children bathing in the rivers did not constitute total moral decay. They pointed out the absurdity of the fact that the rigid policing of the riverbank kept boys from getting clean in the water, in the name of not offending upper class ladies, who might just consider averting their gaze (“The Crime of Bathing,” July 4, 1876; “The Bathing War,” July 2, 1877). These examples all serve to demonstrate that there was not a unified demand for the shift to this new way of bathing in the rivers.

Another effect of the enclosed tanks was that poor women and girls had, for the first time, a regular place to swim and bathe. A report before the river baths opened insisted that “separate houses for women are absolutely necessary, and the number of hours for women should be equal to those given to men” (Hall, 1870). Although never in the same numbers as men, women did attend: over the years their numbers increased to as much as 1/3 of the total
attendance. One commentator explained that the uneven attendance was, in large part, due to the responsibilities of women to labor in the home:

Men, as a rule, bathe at the end of the day when, their labor finished, they may rest. Women have no such diurnal leisure; they must keep right on with household duties, which are never done. They thus find it almost impossible to slip away to the public bath, even though the inclination to be as clean as their husbands, sons, and brothers may be as strong. ("The School Bath System," May 17, 1896)

The opportunities the baths provided were bound up in the larger social context, particularly the inequity in independence and freedoms allowed to women.

In secondary histories, the question of how much New York’s poorest citizens liked and attended the river baths is complicated (as it is with the rise of the indoor bathhouses). Many accounts at the time indicate that the river baths were very well used (Fisk, 1896; Gerhard, 1908). Each of the original two floating baths built in 1870 accommodated about 4,500 bathers per day, and commentators called for more:

The little gamins, who dirt-begrimed all Winter, daily emerge from them in the summer, the hard worked laborer and artisan, refreshed, take a new lease of life, and the toiling shop-girl is strengthened. Two baths are not enough... an imperative public necessity demands an increase of the number. ("Free Baths," June 22, 1871)\(^2\)

However, some secondary accounts differ: "despite their popularity with the thousands who flocked to cool off on hot summer days, the floating baths had numerous problems. They occupied valuable riverfront space. The polluted rivers gave the baths the reputation of being 'floating sewers'" (Glassberg, 1979, p. 7). Yet the enclosure and policing of the riverbank compelled people to participate if they wanted to bathe in the river, without threat of police

\(^{2}\)The number of bathers was reported weekly in the summer and fall months in a column in the Times from 1870 through at least 1885, which included crime reporting as well as other public health numbers, including how many people had contracted and/or died of infectious disease.
action. This theme of tension between social control and popular demand would repeat itself throughout the bathing project for the century to come.

1901: The rise of indoor bathhouses (and some swimming pools)

In 1895, the State of New York passed a bathhouse ordinance for cities with populations over 50,000.

The Act, which is known as Chapter 351, Laws of 1895, provides substantially that all cities of the first and second class shall establish and maintain such number of free public baths as the local Board of Health will determine to be necessary; that each bath shall be kept open not less than fourteen hours each day, and that both hot and cold water shall be provided. It also states that the erection and maintenance of river or ocean baths shall not be deemed a compliance with the requirements of the law. (Gerhard, 1908, p. 73)

New York City opened its first indoor municipal bath in 1901 – six years after the ordinance, and some ten years after the initial investigation had been made into the potential for the project.27

Previous attempts had been made at the provision of indoor bathhouses for the poorest New Yorkers. The Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor (AICP), a philanthropic organization, had opened a few prototypes of public baths previously. The first opened in 1852, but closed in 1861 due to a lack of patronage. (This is often attributed to the fee that they charged, discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three). The AICP opened another bath in 1891, the People’s Bath, which was “the first year-round hot and cold water public bathhouse in New York City” (Williams, 1991) and led to a number of other philanthropic organizations installing their own public baths (Fisk, 1896: Glassberg, 1979; Renner, 2008).28 The success of the

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27 The question of indoor municipal baths had been open for some time. In an 1888 news clip, Mayor Hewitt recommends that “[indoor] baths be established in some of the down-town parks and be supplied plentifully with warm water during the Winter” (“Free Baths All the Year,” November 29, 1888).

28 An 1896 pamphlet promoting “Rain Baths in America” (or showers) gives an example of philanthropic baths: The
People’s Bath pushed the city to build its own baths with public moneys, but when municipal baths opened they remained in tension for many years with the AICP and other reformers over ideas about how they ought to operate.29

In both philanthropic and municipal structures, reform ideas about the social potential of the bathhouses reigned.30 Goodwin Brown, author of the New York State bathhouse ordinance went so far as to offer,

> for bodily cleanliness is the first essential - by comparison religion, morals and education could be dispensed with and even crime tolerated for the present if this reform could be obtained, for with it crime would soon disappear and the reign of religion, morals and education would be supreme. (Brown, 1900)

Fifteen bathhouses would be built between 1901 – 1905 (Riess, 1989, p. 36) – buildings with a few tubs and many showers, open throughout the year, from 6 AM to 9 or 10 PM, depending upon the borough (Citizen’s Recreation Committee, 1909).31

Another criticism of the municipal baths—both at the time and by contemporary critics—is that they were designed with an institutional feel and were highly surveilled and regimented (Renner, 2008; Wiltse, 2007). Unlike the commercial and ethnic baths already in

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29 As Lindert (2000) points out, "Private charity [in the 19th century] was not a substitute for taxed-based poor relief and was not crowded out by the later rise of that public aid. It was a complement, and the two rose, and occasionally fell, together" (p. 9). Indeed, these were often in tension with one another, as we see today in the argument over whether or not the state should complement, support, or supplant faith-based and other nonprofit organizations for the provision of social goods.

30 Glassberg (1979) asserts, the reformers” built baths not just to ameliorate the condition of the poor but also to help contain it. Reformers hoped that the baths would insure a relatively sanitary urban population until society enacted extensive housing reform” (p. 19).

31 The AICP was not pleased with a number of aspects of the city’s bathing project; they convinced the heiress, Mrs. A.A. Anderson, to buy land on East 38th Street on which to build new baths that the AICP would run (Renner, 2008: 529 [footnote 53]). This was reported as “the direct result of the protest that has been made against insufficient and inadequate bathing facilities for the poor” (“$100,000 for Public Baths,” June 22, 1902).
existence, which were primarily a site for socializing, time at the municipal baths was marked into short sessions, at which time patrons were expected to dry off and move out. Nonetheless, like in the case of the river baths, they were quite popular; residents lined up around the block for a shower in all months of the year (Veiller, 1901). As Cranz (1982) points out, while public spaces are “mechanisms of social control, they manage to express a life force independent of social order” (pp. 241 - 2). This gestures at a complicated dynamic in which the poorest residents were both enthusiastic patrons of municipally provided baths, and subject to a great deal of discipline in order to participate in the municipal provision of bathing places.

Reformers also believed, at times, that the municipal baths could have a good influence on the state of the private commercial baths, such as those that were popular among the lower classes in places like Coney Island. Some hoped it would set a higher standard that would lead to “a general sprucing up among the more pretentious baths and tend to the extermination of the less pretentious, shanty-like structures that encumber the beaches around New York” (“Physicians Favor Municipal Baths,” May 30, 1910). Thus we see that their sights were not just set on municipal provision of a better bath, but also an end to those ‘ramshackle’ baths, that were so popular at the time, to overcome other parts of infrastructure that did not promote the same social goals.

In 1906, just five years into the baths project, the West 60th Street bath was the first built with a swimming pool in its design (“Public Baths Here Will Be Renovated,” September 1, 1935).
The 23rd Street bath followed in 1908; its opening was celebrated with a ‘water carnival’ (“New Public Baths,” January 19, 1908).

The first pools were often housed in the basements of bath buildings; they were small and had poor lighting and ventilation. Many contemporary historians suggest the introduction of indoor pools into the municipal baths, beginning in 1904 was an attempt to attract patrons in numbers enough to justify their continued provision and maintenance – that they were a concession on the part of some reformers, who wanted the baths to remain austere places for cleanliness and hygienic habits, not for play (Gutman, 2007; Renner, 2008; Wiltse, 2007). There had, in fact, been a long-standing split among public health officials as to whether or not pools
should be part of the original plant of the baths (“Baths for the People,” May 28, 1896). The 1897 report of the Committee of Seventy, which had made the original bathhouse recommendations conceded, “The bathing habit abroad has been greatly increased owing to the popularity of the swimming baths, and it is believed that municipal establishments here will be more successful in accomplishing their purposes if swimming baths be included in their arrangements” (Hamilton, Morriss, & Tolman, 1897, p. 19).

Bier (2011), however, looks at the historical record and sees a compromise: "the demand was there for both kinds of baths - the kind for cleansing and the kind for recreation" (p. 20). When the Carmine Street baths expanded in 1915, they offered “an extension of one story … on the south side to contain a large swimming pool,” as well as “an increase in the number of shower baths … from 97 to 171” (“Public Bath Addition,” January 3, 1915). Even taking into account the pressure put on the city by reformers to keep showers in the design, it would seem outlandish to sink such a large capital investment in a new structure into showers that nobody used.

Meanwhile, in the same period, the river baths did not disappear, as they had become a fixture in the lives of people who wanted to bathe outdoors, and who wanted more time and freedom in the water. Although pollution got worse as the years went on—as the rivers carried sewage, industrial waste, and blood from slaughterhouses—the river baths remained

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32 Pools were a part of the original recommendations of the Preliminary Report of the Committee of Seventy’s Sub-Committee on public baths. “The committee has been guided in its deliberations by the act that the immediate need of the people demands a system of baths for cleansing. It has also been mindful that there is a large class in the community who would like to avail themselves of the advantages of swimming baths, with which the European cities are provided. The swimming bath frequently affords valuable gymnastic exercise and is the means of attracting to the bath a class of people that otherwise would not come.” They did suggest, however, that this demand be met by finding a well-off donor to provide this more extravagant physical plant (Hamilton, et al., 1895).
popular, as did open river swimming. A conflict arose in the period immediately after the indoor baths opened in 1901, and continued up through the second decade of the 20th century, over the hazard that swimming in the river water posed, as incidents like a widespread case of pinkeye would crop up now and again (Duffy, 1974, p. 518). The argument was made, by at least one commentator, that if the river baths were closed, working class boys and young men would simply go back to swimming at the riverbank. (Mostly unmentioned was that poor girls and women and others would have no access to open water at all.)

It is impossible to keep boys and young men out of these same waters. If there were no baths they would jump from the pierheads, and all the police in New York could not keep these amphibious dock rats on land when the desire for a swim takes possession of them. ... The best service the Health Department can render in the matter of the swimming baths is to see that they are situated in the best places which can be found and where the water is as little contaminated as possible. Bad as they may be, they have been and are very useful, and thousands daily find pleasure in them who would reluctantly use and less enjoy cleaner water with more restraints. (“Public Baths,” August, 10, 1903)

This conflict grew in the nineteen-teens, with Public Health officials, on the one hand, declaring many of the city’s waterfront areas too polluted for bathing (“Bathing in Polluted Hudson,” May 27, 1911; “Find Public Baths Endanger Health,” May 22, 1912), and Parks officials, on the other, opening them readily to an excited public each year (“Free Bath Season Opens at Battery,” July 2, 1910; “Five Public Baths Open,” July 8, 1911). Once again, the movement between structures for bathing was not neat, and this time it was emphasized by the tension between the state imposing the order of the bathhouse, and the comparable freedom that people enjoyed in the dirty water of the river.

34It bears mentioning that during this time, regular indoor pools were still of the ‘fill and draw’ variety, described as follows: “Pools thronged with grubby bathers quickly became dirty and had to be emptied, scrubbed out and refilled on a regular basis - efficient systems for chemical management and filtration not being developed until 1918 [in the UK]” (Parr, 2011, p. 94).
When the Department of Public Works and the Health Department moved to close the river baths for good, on sanitary grounds, the decision was met with suspicion that the City wanted to close the river baths in order to force patronage at the indoor baths, which Health Commissioner Lederle denied, stating “it would be hardly correct to say that his department had put the ban on the Hudson River for the purposes of the municipal baths” (“Find Public Baths Endanger Health,” May 22, 1912). When the decision was finally made, Lederle made clear that the river baths had been kept open as long as they had because it would be unfair “to deprive the poor of their only means of open-air bathing without providing some sort of a substitute” (“River Bathhouses Soon to Be Ended,” June 29, 1912). In public hearings, discussion also included the question of whether more people would get sick from the river water or from summer heat in the city.\(^{35}\)

The solution, in 1914, was to make the floating baths watertight, and to fill them with purified, filtered water (Duffy, 1974, p. 519; Williams, 1991, p. 38).\(^{36}\) Even with the baths sealed and filled with Croton water, an argument remained—fought out between Manhattan Borough President Marks and City Controller Prendergast—over whether the money needed to sustain the river baths, now much more expensive, should be appropriated, and from where. Marks was insistent on municipal provision of the river baths: “To swim in the open air and sunshine is what the children want. If they jump into the river they are arrested, and what are they to do?"

\(^{35}\) Beaches were also subject to closure due to pollution. In March, 1915, the Board of Health “issued an order forbidding bathing establishments in nearly all of the city’s river and harbor waters. Over 540 of the city’s 576 miles of waterfront were declared unfit for bathing.... In issuing this order, Deputy Commissioner Haven Emerson pointed out that an estimated 700,000,000 gallons of sewage per day were emptying into these waters” (Duffy, 1974, p. 519).

\(^{36}\) A later account claimed that “The public did not take so kindly to fresh water—‘sweet’ water, they called it—both because it was colder and because they felt it did not have the medicinal properties of salt water,” as the East River is quite brackish. Those who could swim “preferred to bathe in the tidal waters even thought they were dirty and oily” (“Public Baths Here Will Be Renovated,” 1935).
The floating baths have always been very popular, and they are in locations where no proper interior baths are accessible” (“No Floating Baths,” May 29, 1915). Mayor McAneny supported Marks, noting that “the floating baths served parts of the city not near the public bath houses,” and he added, “to deprive the people of this service to which they have become accustomed would, to my mind, be unwise, poor economy, and wholly without warrant” (“Floating Baths Defeated,” June 5, 1915).

But the AICP, still influential, couldn’t give up their insistence that the municipal bathing project ought to be about cleanliness, foremost, and order. In a Letter to the Editor of the New York Times, the AICP Director of Social Welfare insisted, “a small pool with thirty or forty showers attached can be built on land for very little more than twice the cost of a sanitary river float. Such a bath encourages cleanliness all the year around, while a river bath, even under ideal sanitary conditions, would probably amount to little more than a series of swims during the Summer time,” and went on to say, “the enforcement of this measure is essential for establishing public decency and for insuring the public health” (“Indoor City Baths,” March 28, 1914). This last sentence makes evident the distaste of this most prominent group of reformers for municipal provision of what had become places used largely for unstructured play: naked swimming at the river bank was declared indecent for the sensibilities of passers-by – a problem for which there was an infrastructural solution. And when patrons appropriated that structure for their enjoyment, it was also declared indecent.

This conflict brings to the fore a few new elements. First, young people are taken seriously as members of the public by the mayor – not as people who need to become better citizens as in the earlier speeches on playgrounds, but as people who are entitled to a public
amenity that they enjoy. Second, we see here the power of the non-governmental elites (the AICP) in questions of governance over public infrastructure.

Bathhouses continued to be built through the 1920s, both in municipal indoor baths (Harlem’s 134th Street Bath—which would become Hansborough pool, discussed in Chapter Six—was not built until 1921) and in public schools. In 1920 a proposal was even made to set up outdoor showers which would be attached to the fire hydrant lines, as the existing baths were not sufficient, and the closure of many river baths left few options in the most dense neighborhoods.

There is one public bath to 200,000 people in one section of the city, according to tabulations and statistics prepared by New York Community Service. This bath is located at 133 Allen Street near Rivington Street. There is now a movement under way to get an appropriation from the Board of Estimate for the purpose of erecting temporary ‘shelter showers’ in the most congested neighborhoods of the city. (“Plan Bath Houses,” July 4, 1920)

These temporary showers were attempted later that summer, where the Fire Chief cordoned off a small street and made it into a ‘shower street’ (“Shower Bath for Children,” July 21, 1920).37

In 1924, long after plumbing had become a regular amenity, the City was still giving 9 million baths (or showers) per year, and that the facilities provided were not sufficient for the most dense areas of the city. This was a serious change from the time when pools ostensibly had to be built to entice enough people to justify keeping them open.38 By this period, one article describes, “all the baths have their swimming pools, but these are often set apart for the

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37 This program eventually expanded, and continued for a number of years, with fourteen street showers open in Summer, 1929, six of which were equipped with (likely wading) pools (“City Baths to Be Opened,” June 13, 1929).
38 In one personal account from the Tenement Museum blog (Barnard, 2011), “By the 1920s, the City’s bathhouses were sites of social recreation—described as “almost as much of a summer resort as Coney Island” (Reinitz, March 21, 1926).
frolic of boys, while patrons far more numerous pass in and out without glimpsing at the pool” (“City Gives 9 Million Public Baths,” August 24, 1924). Why the change? Perhaps it took time for urban dwellers to become accustomed—and to feel they ought—to bathe regularly. Perhaps the taboo on using city facilities changed. Perhaps people succumbed to the order that was set up through a combination of robust infrastructure and enclosure. Regardless of the answer to this particular question, discipline is only part of the picture; the fact is that the baths were well used for many years, even increasing in demand, in spite of tight rules and restrictions in and around them.

In the background, the conflict over the river and the river baths remained. In 1932, seven floating pools were still operating, as public health experts and city officials still were struggling to keep people out of the rivers, due to the pollution and regular drownings (“ Warns of Bathing,” July 2, 1930). There was also the simple distaste that city officials (including Parks administrators and Police) had for the nudity they had been trying to stamp out for more than sixty years. Superintendent Jennings of Parks expresses this dispute in an in internal memo from 1938:

Friday evening at 8:30, there were at least twenty young men swimming naked in the River at 86th Street, in full view of motorists bound in both directions. I shall expect this practice to be discontinued immediately, not only at this location but at all points where parks front on waters where bathing is not countenanced. (Jennings, June 25, 1938, emphasis added)

The Department of Health sponsored a program in 1937 – 8 in order to teach children the dangers of East River swimming (see Chapter Five – Swimming lessons). Yet some children of Manhattan in the 1930s and 40s recall time spent in the water fondly.

We could all swim like rats.... We’d lay on our backs and we’d float up to 42nd Street with the tide. Then we’d stay up there on the pier till nine or ten o’clock,
when the tide turned and we’d float back down. There were gangs of kids floatin’ on the river... We loved the dirty, greasy water. (Kisseloff, 1989, p. 501)

Even when the large WPA pools were built in 1936, this flotilla of children retained a degree of freedom that couldn’t be matched as they rode the tidal strait up and down the length of the island—in spite of the filthy water—and they resisted letting it go.

1936: Robert Moses’ outdoor pools, funded by the WPA

The city’s bathing infrastructure took on a new form in the summer of 1936, when Parks Commissioner Robert Moses and Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia opened eleven outdoor pools—one each week, to great fanfare—with capacities in the thousands, at a cost of $1 million each in Works Progress Administration (WPA) funds.

![Fig. 2.5: Astoria Pool, 1937](image)

Source: Museum of the City of New York (Gottscho-Schleisner, Inc., 1937)
This new element in the bathing project intervened in a bathing environment that had become more varied and complex, but also ushered in an era of “new spaces of public informality” (Gutman, 2007, pp. 72 - 3).

The new outdoor pools were grander than anything the city had seen before, and were built with a set of federal funds that have not existed for capital projects in Parks since that time. The infrastructure of the municipal bathing project was, for the first time, broadened to include play explicitly, for at least three reasons. First, the priority placed on building pools at all, as opposed to other projects with WPA dollars (of which there were many), had to do with the preferences of Robert Moses -- he himself had been a competitive swimmer, and wanted to see New Yorkers in an organized setting in the water, even for play. (The 1930s and 40s would also see a rise in swim lessons and leagues for young people through the Parks Department pools.)

Second, part of the cultural imperative for the pools was in the rise of beach bathing and culture in the intervening years since the bathhouses had been built (Bier, 2011; Nasaw, 1993; Von Borosini, 1910); the new outdoor pools provided more ready access to beach-style recreation for New Yorkers in their own neighborhoods. In the UK (which had a strong cultural connection to shifts in American culture and notions of health), “by the early 1930s, open air pools had become emblems of municipal modernity and of faith in a brighter, more enlightened future, in much the same way as public libraries had become a generation or two earlier” (Smith, 2005, p. 19). Further, they could be reached by many New Yorkers on foot or a short bus ride. Finally, the pools were open in the summer months when school let out, and city

39 Moses had little compunction about wielding his authority to prioritize a kind of project just because he liked it: “[b]ecause of his fascination with water in general and swimming in particular, Moses gave each of the pools...his personal attention...Despite the WPA requirements that only the cheapest materials be used, each pool turned out to be a municipal marvel of the first magnitude” (Caro, 1975, pp. 512 – 513).
officials from many departments were interested in simply having young people ‘off the streets and out of trouble’ – if this meant exuberant, flirtatious behavior under the watchful eye of the lifeguard, so be it.40

Other parts of the municipal bathing project continued to thrive as well. The floating baths were still receiving thousands visits per summer, the bathhouse program had been implemented 35 years prior (though many would soon transition to recreation centers), and beach bathing at the ocean was becoming more popular. (Parks department press releases record 4 million visitors to New York City Beaches in the summer of 1939, swelling to 8 million by 1945.)

Like in every previous phase, a landscape of swimming and bathing already existed at the moment the city began to build outdoor pools. Commercial entities had pools around the city: the YMCAs were booming as sites of indoor swimming, as were ethnic organizations,41 and some private outdoor pools were open around the city, though many were racially segregated, or required a membership fee. Upon the announcement of the pending construction of municipal pools, in 1934, many in the business community objected that they would inject unfair competition into the recreation landscape, and might end with public relief moneys driving private proprietors out of business. Both Commissioner Moses and Mayor LaGuardia objected to these claims, offering that the municipal pools would be offering a different service, and catering to a different clientele than the existing private pools (“Moses to Ignore,” August 9, 1934; “New Park Pools Opposed,” September 22, 1934).

40 These efforts were in no way ‘coincidental.’ Different agencies across the city have long colluded on issues of youth control. A 1940 report, for instance, records that "This list of public recreational facilities has been prepared, at the request of Mayor Fiorello H. LaGuardia, by the Department of Parks in cooperation with the Board of Education and the Juvenile Aid Bureau of the Police Department" (Department of Parks, 1940).
One question that emerges is, if pools and baths already existed in a number of configurations at the time, and beaches were quite popular, what was the purpose of the municipal government building its own system? Perhaps the state was more efficient, and could take more mind of how the pools would be distributed over space in order to make them accessible to the maximum number of people, particularly poor people. This was, in fact, the official line, particularly in arguments about racist siting of pools. This sort of building project is anathema to the current political mode of thinking about spending for infrastructure for the public good. In contrast to the popular contemporary belief in maximum efficiency through extra-state organizations—Public-Private Partnerships or conservancies—the state in this case built a robust public infrastructure alongside a fragmented private one.

The WPA pools brought recreational swimming and bathing to the heart of the city, where many could not leave during the summer months. And unlike the austere bathhouses for cleansing, these were structures of spectacle, with underwater lights, and “at least one dimension... set at 55 yards, so races could be held at regulation distances” (Gutman in Ballon and Jackson, 2007, p. 136). In the early years, they were often open from 10 am to 10 pm, particularly in hot periods of the season (Niebling, June 26, 1943), and occasionally they were even open until midnight (White, September 10, 1959), satisfying the need for recreation and

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42 On the question of whether siting of these pools was based on Moses’s personal contempt for racial mixing, see Caro (1975, p. 513), Chronopolous (2013), and Gutman (2008, p. 553). A map of the distribution of New York City outdoor public pools shows site placement that appears much more willy-nilly, based to some extent on land availability. “To capitalize on existing resources and limit the costs and delays of acquiring new land, pools were built whenever possible in already-existing parks” (Mogilevich and Gutman). The largest concentration of pools was sited in Manhattan and on the Manhattan-facing edges of the outer boroughs (StatsBee, 2013).
cooling among New York’s densely packed residents.\textsuperscript{43} (With the exception of the recently restored McCarren Park Pool in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, all have remained in operation, except for short periods of renovation, since they opened.) These would become iconic elements in the summer lives of New Yorkers.

In the same period, one last attempt was made by the Department of Parks to save the floating baths, by attaching them to barges in the East River (Moses, July 22, 1938) and the Hudson River at 96\textsuperscript{th} Street (Press Release, March 20, 1938).\textsuperscript{44} “Made watertight using asbestos tile, two of the floating pools flanked [a] third barge, which had been reconfigured as a bathhouse... These pools were used for only a few years, as Moses was unable to convince the city council to fund their upkeep. They fell apart and were abandoned in 1942” (Gutman in Ballon and Jackson, 2007, p. 156).

In the meantime, uncertainty remained about what to do with the bathhouses, still necessary but waning in attendance.\textsuperscript{45} A few different attempts were made to revive them in different forms. One call was to fix them up and provide laundry “so that the needy and homeless will be able to wash their clothes as well as their bodies” (“Public Baths Here,” September 1, 1935). A 1936 article about the baths in Manhattan shows six bath houses under

\textsuperscript{43}At other times, over concern with operating costs at the end of the season, hours would be shortened. At the end of the 1943 season, administrators decide “Because of the cool evenings and lack of business, we have been closing the pools at 6PM on a day-to-day basis” (Niebling, August 20, 1943).

\textsuperscript{44}Parks Supervisor Allyn R Jennings had hoped to expand this new round of river baths, arguing that “From an economic standpoint, it is my firm belief that floating baths can be built to serve more patrons at a much lesser cost than to build swimming pools and bathhouse accommodations of equivalent size, in sections of the City now lacking swimming facilities” (Jennings, September 7, 1938). This plan was swiftly rebuffed by Moses, who insisted that the Barge baths were installed “merely as an experiment,” and that the plan was “entirely out of harmony with the program and policy of the Park Department under its present management” (Moses, September 8, 1938).

\textsuperscript{45}This was true of commercial bathhouses in the same period. As Moses himself noted, in a 1937 report entitled “The improvement of Coney Island, Rockaway and South Beaches,” “... of later years the mechanical amusement business has been gradually decreasing. Bathing establishments also have been subject to this trend” (Moses, 1937, p. 4).
the jurisdiction of the Manhattan Borough President, with the remaining ten under the control of Parks, requiring them to draw from separate budgets and make separate appeals to the city for renovations. But the plan to use the baths to support the homeless primarily didn’t have much staying power; in 1935, the Sixtieth Street bath was retrofitted to house a swimming pool (“Public Baths Here,” September 1, 1935), and by 1938, WPA funding had been secured, four of the Manhattan Borough bathhouses had been transferred to Parks, and renovations were underway (“Baths to Be Improved,” May 31, 1938). By 1940 all but two of the Manhattan baths were consolidated under the Department of Parks, and six were renovated as parts of larger recreation centers with gymnasia, etc.

Showers, however, were still in use – they just weren’t a highly publicized priority. Yet, in 1939, both the American Labor Party and the Communist Party offices in Chelsea sent letters to Commissioner Moses, asking that renovations be completed quickly on the local recreation center: “with the hot weather again approaching, the demand for these Baths is greater than ever in a community where the proportion of homes without indoor bathtubs is extremely high” (Rollins, March 31, 1939). So while most New Yorkers had been bathing at home for some time, those who could not depended on the strength of political organizations to advocate for this need at the level of the city.

In an official capacity, the need for cleansing baths almost didn’t exist, as expressed in a 1940 press release from the Department of Parks, which stated

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46 Moses, at least quietly, recognized this need. When Colonel Davis D. Graves, of the New York Air Defense Wing requested that the Chelsea Baths be turned over to his men for the war effort, Moses responded, “I decline to do this and am astonished that you should make a request of this kind which indicates that you have no understanding of the civilian requirements of New York City.” He went on, “the building includes gymnasium and bathing facilities, and also cleansing baths for thousands of people who have no other way of bathing because they live in cold water flats in the neighborhood” (Moses, October 17, 1942).
Steps were immediately taken and plans were prepared for the reconstruction of these buildings so that they would serve the recreation needs of the community; the need for the cleansing baths having diminished to a point where they received comparatively little use. (Press Release, Department of Parks, February 12, 1940)

This idea may, however, have been self-reinforcing, as the buildings which were renovated no longer had bathing for cleansing at the center of their program, and thus came up against the following complaints:

There is a definite falling off in the use of the cleansing baths due to the following reasons:

A - Open showers (no privacy)
B - Don't like to check clothes in baskets
C - No hot water available
D - Construction forces still working in this section
E - People think they have to pay (patronage increasing daily)

(Latham, July 14, 1939)

The lack of privacy in shower stalls, in particular, points to a focus on recreation as opposed to cleansing, even though some demand remained. And as bathing had become more regular over the course of the century for all New Yorkers, patrons desired and expected more privacy, even in a municipal bath. Additionally, as pools had been improved, and swim lessons were being offered free of charge (Press Release, Department of Parks, March 11, 1940), the numbers (or the proportion of showerers as opposed to recreational swimmers) would shrink.47

In this change in management—from the Borough (or Health and Human Services) to Parks—we might observe a reverse operation in which the new infrastructure pushed the

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47 A 1942 letter writing campaign by neighborhood residents called for later hours at the Cherry and Oliver Street baths (as opposed to the 9 – 5 that had been recently imposed) so that residents who got home from work later than that could shower more regularly. (Municipal Archives, Parks Department Files for Manhattan: Baths). A similar letter appears in 1946 regarding the 109th street bathhouse (Greenberg, August 30, 1946).
agenda toward recreation. With the introduction of outdoor pools, swimming was now on the leisure roster, and the need for showers was no longer their official purpose. This raises the question of how much is ‘enough’ use, how many are ‘enough’ patrons to justify maintaining structures like the baths, where the only public may be the very poor, or the homeless (See Mitchell, 2003).

These decisions didn’t move in a straight trajectory – it is hard to discern a pattern for the bathing project again until the 1970s. In 1940, WPA funds were used to remodel the Allen Street bathhouse “until it [looked] like a Hollywood gymnasium” (“Allen Street Baths,” July 26, 1940; “Renovated Baths,” July 27, 1940). But in 1952, rather than renovate, Brooklyn closed four bathhouses (“Brooklyn to Close,” June 15, 1952). By 1960, Allen Street was the last bathhouse, as such, standing, serving more than 131,000 people each year, 28,000 of them women, and charging nothing for admission but a quarter for the use of soap and towel.

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48 A 1944 survey of the Metropolitan Bathhouse in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, still counted ‘Male Showers’ and ‘Female Showers’ as separate attendance from ‘Male Pool’ and ‘Female Pool’ (Latham, March 25, 1944).
The reporter, calling the bath a “tile Taj Mahal” notes that this number is “an increase of 9,000 over 1958, when Manhattan had two other public bathhouses operating - one on East Eleventh Street, another on East 9th Street. Both have been closed by the Borough President's office to save money” (Talese, 1960). Allen Street would close in 1975 due to the city’s financial crisis (Barnard, 2011).

In the early 1950s, a program of building new recreation centers would begin, with the construction, over five years, of the St. John’s Center in Brooklyn, St. Mary’s center in the Bronx, and the Brownsville Boys’ Club in Brooklyn. Some criticized these for being too expensive and fancy, but Commissioner Moses stood by the decision to build them, citing a real need for them in the neighborhoods where they were built (“Play Unit,” March 31, 1956) based on a
1945 study “of the sections of the city where it was thought these facilities were most needed, to show existing recreation facilities of other organizations such as schools, YMCA's, churches, settlement houses, athletic clubs, and social and fraternal organizations so as to avoid duplicating any of the work now being performed by other agencies” (Downing, January 9, 1945). Meanwhile, some others fell into total disrepair. In 1948, for instance, Moses wrote to Mayor O’Dwyer, “requesting that the Director of Real Estate be authorized to advertise the sale for demolition and removal of the abandoned two-story bathhouse at 523 East 76th Street, Borough of Manhattan” (Moses, November 8, 1948). All the while, the WPA pools remained very popular, seeing millions of visitors each year.

1968 - 1972: Intermediate pools and a flexible plan

The pools built under Mayor Lindsay and Parks Commissioner August Heckscher, from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s were actually fewer, and built on a smaller scale, than the Mayor, a pools enthusiast, would have liked to see built. To some extent, his expansion of the municipal bathing project responded to crowding so intense at the existing pools, that some filled to capacity regularly in the summer months, forcing patrons to stand outside and wait to enter until somebody left (“Pools Reflect,” August 6, 1968). Lindsay’s’ program was creative and flexible, with small neighborhood pools that reflected the vest-pocket park movement of the time. It included mini-pools for small children tucked into parks; mobile pools rolled into neighborhoods on the backs of flatbed trucks and filled with (cold!) fire hydrant water⁴⁹; ‘intermediate’ pools for all ages (meaning that they had a smaller footprint than the Moses

⁴⁹ Mobile pools were revived in the late 1980s (Geist, July 1, 1987) and more recently in small installations such as the DOT Dumpster pools in summer 2012.
pools); a spray cap program for play around fire hydrants (to reduce the flow of water). During his campaign, Lindsay also promoted a plan to install pools on barges anchored all around the city, which never materialized (Cariello, February 14, 1966; Starke, September 29, 1965). A few grand pools were also built during this period including Architect Morris Lapidus’s Kosciuszko pool in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn in 1971 (Perlmutter, July 11, 1971)50, and the Mount Morris pool in Harlem, now Marcus Garvey Park pool (“City Opens 9th,” August 20, 1971).

But aside from a general enthusiasm for swimming and for play, the Lindsay administration was interested in them as a strategy to quell potential urban unrest. In the findings of a report to Mayor Lindsay, entitled ‘Summer in Our City: New York in 1967 and 1968,’ citizen task forces were recruited “to develop short-run strategies to maintain community order and prevent incidents from turning into disturbances from turning into riots” (Gottehrer, 1968). Strategies included ‘Operation Swimming Pool,’ in which 44 municipal pools were open during the day and 39 in the evening. In this case, the municipal bathing project was deployed at once to offer urban populations meaningful amenities, with an underlying racist discourse of “cool[ing] off angry young men” (Wiltse, 2007, p. 188) in cities brimming with racial

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50 A desire to build a pool in Bedford-Stuyvesant existed early as 1944 “because of the social and economic considerations” (Jenkins, June 2, 1944).
tension, largely over disinvestment in communities of color.\(^{51}\) (Requests for funding were made, at least in part, to the city’s Anti-Poverty Operations Board (Hoving, 1966).\(^{52}\)

While many community members were pleased with the attempt to increase services, plenty saw through the rhetoric and called for more thorough provision of city maintenance and programs. The report includes a letter from one such community member:

As members of the Bushwick advisory committee to the Emergency Summer Task Force, we strongly urge the continuance of this kind of liaison with the mayor’s office on a year-round basis. As you well know, the problems of the ghetto cannot be alleviated by temporary cooling programs during the hot summer months. (Gottehrer, 1968, p. 21)

This writer points out that the rhetoric around municipal provisions for recreation represented tokenistic moves to alleviate racist policies in the provision of city services more broadly.\(^{53}\)

Wiltse (2014) offers:

Most of the municipal pools opened during this late-1960s building spree, however, did not provide viable recreation or encourage actual swimming. Overall, 70 of the 84 pools opened in New York... were ‘mini-pools,’ measuring only 20 by 40 ft. and uniformly 3 ft. deep. The pools were usually too crowded for swimming, so youngsters mostly stood in the water splashing. (p. 14)

\(^{51}\) The pools’ manufacturers were aware of this as well. In a memo to the Lindsay administration, one employee in their Los Angeles office offers, “I am sure Commissioner Hoving has kept you informed as to the tremendous success of the two Port-A-Pools now in use in the Bedford-Stuyvesant [sic] and East New York areas. Of course, these two pools are not exactly used for instructional purposes; however, they do satisfy an urgent need for this type of inexpensive recreational facility and, at the same time, help to prevent unpleasant situations from arising” (Molonea, September 2, 1966).

\(^{52}\) The same technique was attempted in many cities. Victoria Wolcott (2012) quotes columnist Mike Royko on an agreement to provide better outdoor recreational facilities in Black neighborhoods in Chicago in 1966, ‘City Hall embarked on a crusade to make Chicago's blacks the wettest in the country. Portable swimming pools were being trucked in. Sprinklers were attached to hundreds of hydrants, and water was gushing everywhere. The city’s department of planning mobilized to launch a long-range program of black wetness... One cynical civil rights worker said, 'I think they're hoping we'll all grow gills and swim away’” (p. 212).

\(^{53}\) A 1969 report from the New School entitled Planning for Parks and Recreation Needs in Urban Areas concurs with this criticism: “There appears to be a growing tendency to concentrate the city's concern for civil rights, and for the amelioration of poverty, somewhat less on the programs to ensure such rights or to eliminate poverty, than on methods to avoid or contain rioting. In this context, recreation programs have been considered useful. " The author continues, “The use of recreation programs merely as distractions is not productive or economically sound. The causes of summer violence must be understood if recreation programs are to be used for any significant contribution to permanent peace” (Guggenheimer, 1969: p. 31, p. 33).
While Wiltse objects, fairly, to the racist terms for distribution of municipal services, his numbers in this case don’t take into account, first, that 14 adult-sized pools were built, particularly in neighborhoods that needed them. Second, he raises the question: are children (and their parents) the public? The mini pools have persisted in neighborhoods, and provide something different for children – a place to splash and cool off. If we return to the notion that the municipal bathing project has been largely infrastructural, and that what has been built tends to persist, the advantage of building pools is that they continued to offer access to water for play in New York’s hottest months, long after the Task Force subsided.54

**Conclusion**

The enclosure of water, or building is one of the main ways that the municipal bathing project has mediatee social life in public spaces over the 19th and 20th centuries. Two major characteristics of the building aspect of the project are intervention and persistence. These both describe the reconfiguration of public spaces and their various opposites over time.

Intervention means that the physical structures of the municipal bathing project repeatedly inserted physical structures in an existing landscape of private bathing, which existed both in social settings and in the home. These structures functioned as a whole system which conveyed water, ideas about health, and increased state capacity for social governance.

In each case of intervention, we see tensions between what the city built, what already had

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54 The rhetoric of ‘cleanliness’ continued to echo, however. In the opening ceremony for the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood pool in 1971, “The exercises were preceded by a parade of Boy Scouts and other youngsters to the main pool. They carried such signs as ‘Don’t Dip in Dangerous Drugs, Come Dip and Get Hip in Your New Pool’ and ‘Pledge Clean Minds, Speech and Bodies’” (Perlmutter, July 11, 1971).
been built—both by private corporations and by the state itself, and between elite ideas of proper comportment and the realities of everyday behavior. In each case, a tank of water or a shower or some combination of these is meant to solve some set of social problems, with a focus on the bodies of poor people which, in turn, form a public in and through the space.

Persistence describes the tendency of buildings and their affiliated functions to continue to function and attract patronage even after, on a larger scale, they may seem to have outlived their use. One way that persistence works is that old and new forms of governance and regimes of ownership operate side by side. Another is that different groups vie for support of one set of structures or another.

As the infrastructures of municipal bathing either intervene or persist, the old and the new objects, and the infrastructural systems to which they belong, may or may not interact in the physical world and in the popular imagination. They do compete, however, for legitimacy, as expressed in capital investment and political will, and in the rhetoric of state provision for health that surround them.
Chapter Three – Fee or Free

The Brooklyn heat on the opening day of pools season at the end of June brings hundreds of people to wait in line at Kosciuszko pool, in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn, known locally as K-Pool. From two blocks away, I can see crowds of people heading for the looming cement structure -- a sea of bodies there: fat and skinny and bathing suits and towels and skin and goggles and occasional swim caps. Patrons stand in groups or pairs, and most children are in groups accompanied by one or two adults or older kids. Boys stand on the sidewalk in only bathing trunks and flip-flops; some girls wear shorts over their swimsuits. They have towels around their shoulders, and combination locks in hand.

On this sweltering day, I wait on the bright sidewalk, and hope to make my way out of the sunlight and into the shade of a cement overhang that shelters the front portion of the line. Just ahead of me are two young Black women with three small boys between them, probably six, seven, and eight. The women appear to be African Muslims – they wear jeans and long tunics in dark colors, and hijab (head coverings). They speak to their children in a language I do not recognize. The boys wear mesh basketball shorts and jerseys, but not actual bathing trunks.

At some point, another child, probably ten or eleven, who is standing behind me in orange swim trunks with his friends or brothers, realizes that these children will not be allowed in wearing basketball shorts and colored jerseys, and tries to explain this to the oldest of the three in front of me. He speaks to him tenderly, getting close and whispering in a tone that children reserve for one another. But the child in front of me refuses to believe what he is being told, or doesn’t know how to respond, and brushes him off; the other child returns to his spot behind me with his companions.
After waiting in the sun for almost an hour, when the group of children and mothers get to the front of the line, Parks Enforcement Police (PEP) Officers deny them entry because the boys do not have proper swimsuits, and the mothers have only their street clothes on (leave alone that they would not likely have been willing to wear Western bathing suits.) A woman from Parks pulls them to the side and loudly explains that they need suits with mesh inside, that they sell them down the street at a discount store for $2.99. (This will be disconfirmed inside, as many teenagers are in the pool in basketball shorts with boxer shorts underneath.) She calls the boy in the orange trunks over, to show them the mesh inside the waistband of his swimsuit. The boys in front of me look up at the Parks officer, with a pleading look, but the answer is no. Without anyone to mediate or advocate for them, they leave without much more explanation.

At first blush, the New York City pools might seem incredibly accessible: there is no fee for entry, and many patrons are able to walk over to take mass transit. However, a long list of rules governs New York City’s outdoor pools in the summer. These rules include being allowed only to wear a white t-shirt, the requirement of a combination lock, and a prohibition on food or unbound printed material on deck.
While rationale exists from the Parks Department for each of these—safety, efficiency, cleanliness—the cumulative effect is of a barrier to entry through hassle; some feel that they cannot participate or don’t belong.

As I argue in Chapter One, a positive interpretation of the idea of access to public space—the descriptor many people use to describe a place or activity as public—emphasizes a state of belonging, in which the space belongs to the users, and the users to the space, so that they are counted as legitimate participants in the life of the space. Here, I elucidate some of the problems in understanding what access means by telling the story of user fees from the river baths and bathhouses, to the present.

A long history of ambivalence over whether or not to charge a fee for entry surrounds the municipal bathing project in New York. In the second half of the nineteenth century, many of the reformers who promoted the river baths and then the indoor bath houses believed that a fee for entry, of even a small amount would teach very poor New Yorkers, mostly immigrants,
the value of state or philanthropic provision of the baths. Beginning in the 1930s, when the outdoor pools were constructed, the reason for charging a fee—or at least the official line—was most often to balance the Parks Department budget. However, the nominal fee continued to operate for many years after its monetary value had been minimized.

The central conflict I present here occurred inside of the administration of the Parks Department, from the 1930s to the 1950s, over the provision of a separate free period for children at the outdoor pools, which otherwise charged a fee. Through this story, I demonstrate how fees are employed to regulate the social life of the pool, and the extent to which belonging is established and divided through the rules around who is entitled to free municipal goods. In this case, the contest over access to the resources of the pool was hashed out over the attendance of the poorest children, in a framework of interrogating whether they were needy enough to be entitled to free municipal public goods. In this way, they became a subcategory of ‘deserving poor’ (Katz, 1989). The nominal fee, here, operates as a bit of moral technology, and complicates the extent to which public spaces belong to the poorest citizens, and the extent to which they belong.

The data for this particular inquiry draws largely from the archive of the Parks Department in the New York Municipal Archives in the 1930s through the 1960s. Unlike the archives before and after this period, these folders were quite thorough, rich with correspondences among Parks officials, between Parks Department and other departments of city government, and between Parks officials and individual citizens as well as organizations. In turn, the discussion leading up to the decision to eliminate the fee for entry to the outdoor pool
at some point in the 1980s has been an extremely difficult piece of data to track down, both in
the Parks archives and in the newspapers.

Returning to Stoler’s (2009) characterization of the archive as an ethnographic source
(Chapter One), “to understand an archive, one needs to understand the institutions that it
served” (pp. 25 – 6). In the case of the Parks department, as a city agency, I find it useful to
think about the organization as dynamic rather than static, or based on one particular
administration. That is to say, Robert Moses’ Parks administration served the demands of its
leader (with close ties to the LaGuardia administration) through a demanding efficiency, traces
of which are left in the memos and their carbon copies. This also explains why some of the
other archives of the Parks administration are less complete, or hard to find at all: these are
archives of different periods in that organization which we can understand, perhaps, as actually
serving a different kind of institution.

Different systems of fee, free, and a combination of these, have been implemented
among constellations of municipal bathing spaces over time, often accompanied by much hand
wringing from those in charge. In this chapter, particularly in the story of the fee for the
outdoor pools, a small but serious question is raised: is it worth it or necessary to have a free
swimming period, even if it only serves a very small number of children? How few are too few
to make it the right thing to do?55 Is this an expedient decision based on filling the pool during
hours of under-use, or does it serve a group of children who otherwise would have no access at
all? In this chapter, the ways in which a fee perpetuates certain kinds of public is worked out:

55 Gutman (2007) argues that “the modest fees do not seem to have prevented many people from using the new
pools, given the numbers who flocked to them as soon as they were open... the pool fees were one means used to
stabilize the municipal budget” (p. 76).
the public of children, the public of poor people, and the public of people who don’t have other choices.

**The nominal fee**

The idea of a nominal fee has some common-sense appeal. Economists tell us that users will generally value more that which we pay for, even if it is a small amount. In fact, the word ‘nominal’ indicates a chosen number, as opposed to the true market value of a good (Pass, et al., 1991, p. 367). The rationale at work is that the payment of money has the psychological effect of committing us to the choice to partake in a good within a set limit (i.e. mass transit, co-pays at the doctor’s office) and to thus abide by the rules. The nominal fee also indicates to the user that she is consuming a resource. The fee also denotes that the user is entitled to some level of quality or service: the payer is then, to some extent, a customer.

However, the nominal fee is *not* applied to many public goods in the United States, particularly spatial goods: we would find it strange to pay a fee for the use of the public library (though payment for borrowing privileges in a library is common in many countries) or for entry to a public park, but it would not be impossible to do so. In other cases, the administrative cost of collecting the fee is deemed greater than the dollar amount of fees collected, leading to a pragmatic decision not to charge. But even in these cases, the choice to do away with the fee, even if it makes economic sense, can be ideologically fraught.

By charging a fee for participation in municipal bathing spaces, even a nominal fee—as is done in many municipalities in North America—it is set apart from other public spaces. Paradoxically, both charging and not charging can contribute to heightened regulation. In the
periods when a fee has been charged for bathhouses and pools, the rationale has sometimes been that the fee will afford patrons dignity. At other times, it is just ‘everyone doing their part’ to pay for what they use; in these cases, the fee designates the pool as a luxury, or an ‘extra’ that does not serve all people and therefore does not need to be held collectively in the same way as a park. But not charging sets the pool apart too – rather than denoting the pool as a universal public space, free admission can have the effect of denoting the pool as a site for those who have no other option, and of offering minimal service.

**River bath and indoor bathhouse fee history**

The question of whether or not to charge a fee for admission to the first public baths—both river baths and indoor bathhouses—had an antecedent in the charity bath established by the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor (AICP), which opened in 1849, and then closed for lack of patronage; this is often attributed to the fee that they charged (Glassberg, 1979, p. 8) “because [they] believed that a free bath would promote dependence and shiftlessness, whereas a 'small' charge would promote self-respect and self-reliance (Wiltse, 2007, p. 19).”

In the process leading up to the construction of the municipal river baths in 1870, the Metropolitan Bathing Association, a city-run corporation, drafted a bill limiting the fee for

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56 According to Glassberg, the bath opened in 1849, but According to Wiltse (2007) and Renner (2008), it opened in 1852 and “closed in 1861 due to a decrease in funds resulting from the Civil War” (Renner, 2008, p. 529: footnote 38).

57 "May 9th, 1867, an act... was passed to incorporate 'The Metropolitan Bathing Association in the City of New York.' The association was authorized to build and construct bathing houses or floating baths in the City of New York in the East River, North River and Harlem River so as to provide public baths... The association could purchase, lease, take and hold real estate necessary for its use fronting on rivers and erect either floating baths or brick or stone buildings, the latter to conform to the building laws of New York City" (Hamilton, 1897, p. 27).
admission to the baths to 25 cents (Duffy, 1974, p. 44). Ultimately, no fee was charged for entry, but patrons were charged, during some periods, for use of a towel – often this fee took the form of a 25¢ deposit, 22¢ of which was returned upon the return of the towel (Department of Public Works, 1872). Over the years, this towel fee would become a source of some conflict, as the fee was occasionally imposed in order to keep poor boys out, even if they did not want a towel (“Is the Battery Bath Free?,” July 20, 1880).

When the AICP opened their second charity bath, in 1891—perhaps because of the institutional memory of both not being able to sustain the earlier bath project, forty years before, or perhaps because of a population now used to having regular access to free river baths—the question of whether or not to charge a fee came up again. When they did choose to charge, the given reason was balancing the books. Thus, they created a compromise inside of this system: “the 70 – 80,000 patrons each year paying either a nickel to use of the 18 first floor showers or else using one of the nine free basement showers, enabled the AICP nearly to break even” (Glassberg, 1979, pp. 10 – 11). Whereas before, different classes of patrons went to different commercial bathhouses around the city, this tiered pay structure, while offering financial longevity, also initiated a division of baths into classes inside of the same building.

When it came to building the municipal bathhouses, which would open ten years after the People’s Baths, voices of the time differed on whether or not a fee should be charged at all. In their 1897 “Report on Public Baths and Public Comfort Stations,” the Committee of Seventy,

58 A group called the Veteran Temperance Corps launched a campaign around this issue, calling not only for floating baths, but also for “salt water baths at sundry points on the East and Hudson Rivers, of fresh and salt water baths at the Central Park, and of warm and cold water baths at other places in New York City; and of a grand union bathing establishment of Governor’s Island, for the cities of New York and Brooklyn; also of bathing establishments in other cities of the Union” (Free Bathing Places for All, 1869).
“an influential anti-Tammany citizens’ group” (Renner, 2008, p. 512) came out in favor of the fee. The reasons given are both moral and pragmatic:

If the city provides the plant, those using it should pay for that privilege. This is the part of wisdom, because the idea of charity should be mainly eliminated from a public bath, and the operating expenses will be nearly met by the fees. (Hamilton, et al., 1897, pp. 10 – 11)\(^{59}\)

The main objection to the fee was that the indoor baths should not be mistaken for charity, that those who participated should do so as full members of the citizenry. Here, charity implies a handout to those who might ‘take advantage’ as well as a demotion to a low political status. A different side of the argument against charity is that it will increase the dignity of those receiving the service. A 1901 New York Times article on the subject quotes Mr. Frank Tucker, Secretary of the AICP:

> You see, a bath is something different from a library or a park. You can’t pauperize people with public libraries or parks. But anything of such a very personal nature as a bath, a man feels better to pay for. Still, there must always be provision for free baths for people unable to pay. This should be quietly and tactfully managed y those in charge. It should be understood that the hobo who wanders in should be sent to a certain compartment, and allowed to bathe free, without making a formal and humiliating distinction. (“Necessity for More Public Baths,” August 4, 1901)

The ‘hobo’ is presented as the exception here, and as an outcast who should be treated with compassion, but this leaves little room for a person who is not so clearly ‘labeled’ as poor.

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\(^{59}\) This statement echoed the same group’s 1895 report, which used the language “that a certain part of each Bath and Convenience should be free, in order that necessitous cases may be relieved; for the remaining part, a fee should be charged, which sum will contribute towards the operating expenses, and will enable the patrons of the establishment to retain their self-respect” (Hamilton et al., 1895, emphasis in original.)
In the end, the indoor baths would not charge a fee for entry, though, as in the river baths a soap and towel fee often applied, and was a source of some conflict (Hamilton, et al., 1895). In later years, when many were converted to recreation centers with pools, free admission remained the rule. In the 1990s, some began to charge, with the exception of those in the poorest neighborhoods, which were eventually subject to a fee as well.

Outdoor pools fee history

From the opening of the WPA pools in the summer of 1936 until the early 1980s, the New York City Parks Department charged a fee for entry to outdoor pools in the summer at most times. While the fee was minimal—10¢ for children and 20 – 25¢ for adults in most years—the Parks Department expected revenues, for many years, to cover a significant part of the operating costs of the pools for the season (although they always operated at a loss). In different periods, competing official imperatives operated around charging a fee: one was to make an effort to cover operating expenses; another was to maximize attendance (so as to rationalize the loss that the pools took every summer, in spite of the fees). The only class of people that did not have to pay at all times was children, and it was the extent of their need

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60 The AICP itself was eventually willing to admit “the success of public baths, those charging a small fee as well as those entirely free, has been demonstrated beyond a doubt in all cities where they have been established” (AICP, 1901, p. 5, emphasis added).

61 The fee for adults was 20¢ until a tax was added, so it was made 23¢ + 2¢ tax to round the number.

62 According to an inflation calculator at http://www.usinflationcalculator.com/, the fee charged in 1936 is $1.71 (children) and $4.26 (adults) in today’s dollars – not necessarily a small sum.

63 “Income from the ten new and two old pools has been estimated at $949,890 annually. Under a new local law this will go into a park receipts funds to be used to meet expenditures, which are estimated at $879,366.96” (“$1,000,000 City Pool,” June 21, 1936).
and their entitlement that caused a great deal of strife among Parks Department officials, child welfare advocates, and others.

When the pools opened in the summer of 1936, Parks charged a fee of 10¢ for children and 20¢ for adults. This was the first time fees would be charged for use of public spaces and the idea was met with resistance from the start. At the opening ceremony for Hamilton-Fish pool on the Lower East Side, Mayor LaGuardia tried to appease patrons, stating, “This is all new to New York and all experimental... After the experience of this Summer we will know just how to arrange things next year” (“East Side Cheers,” June 25, 1936). Yet it was clear that Moses intended for the fee to be charged over the long term – and it was.

In fact, in March 1936, the spring before the municipal outdoor pools opened, Commissioner Moses had publicly proposed that all city recreational facilities should charge a fee in order to balance the Parks Department budget after relief monies ran out. (The only exception was playgrounds which, at the time, were staffed with attendants.) Moses’s point was that the recreational facilities offered by the city had expanded so much during the WPA years that fees would be necessary in order to maintain the infrastructure as it now existed. In fact, he wanted a separate ‘Parks Receipts Fund’ established (which it was for some period of time) into which the monies from these fees would go in order to keep Parks money out of the general fund, where it was less easily accounted for (“Moses Plans Park Sports Fees,” March 2, 1936). Moses also offered that fees could be done away with altogether if the City wanted to pay for Parks entirely out of bonds and tax revenues, but he thought this idea doomed.64

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64 According to Brecher, Horton, Cropf, & Mead (1993), for at least the past 20 years, there has been a “mismatch [since Moses] between the size of the city's park system and the size of the department's budget that causes much of the system to be in a state of neglect” (p. 14). A master plan for large capital improvement projects has not
In a later correspondence, arguing against budget cuts to Parks at the Board of Estimate (April 16, 1942), Moses himself explains

in order to reduce the cost to the taxpayers of operating park facilities, I recommended in 1936 that a charge be placed on the use of swimming pools and other facilities. I asked that the income be placed in a separate fund to be used only for the cost of operating these facilities. We were advised at that time that this could not be done without legislations and that all revenue had to be deposited in the General Fund. As a compromise, the budgets for the last six years have shown the cost of operating these facilities as a charge against the Tax Levy Budget. (p. 3)

In this document, Moses goes on to argue that as a result of the pools revenues being taken from Parks’ hands, facilities will be in peril, and with them jobs for Parks employees, and the well-being of the city’s children.

The fee for pool admission stood, and general resistance eventually died down. Records of pool attendance, especially in the early years, were kept meticulously—noted by site, hour, age and sometimes gender of patrons—and published in press releases at the end of each summer, including total numbers of free and paid swimmers. In the first five years, the revenue of the Parks Department was as follows:

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often been in place, and projects are funded as they arise – there is no central capital budget for parks. ‘Fixes’ that have been offered for this state of affairs, include increases in private philanthropy (most often funneled through ‘conservancy’ structures), concessioning, user fees, reductions in personnel, and private forms of Park building (like the current Brooklyn Bridge park model).

The original version of this chart in the records includes the number of operating days per season (which are fairly comparable throughout), and then is broken down into capacity and size for swimming and diving at each pool, as well as bathhouse capacity at each pool by gender. For simplicity, I have cleaned the data to show only attendance and revenues. There are also some difficulties with interpreting exactly who was at the pool and how often (i.e. visits can be counted, but visitors cannot.)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Attendance</th>
<th>Financial Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Free period</td>
<td>Child paid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td>594,764</td>
<td>610,612</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1937</td>
<td>665,636</td>
<td>930,932</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>729,872</td>
<td>806,446</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1939</td>
<td>878,151</td>
<td>898,872</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>778,826</td>
<td>751,774</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.1 Department of Parks revenues from outdoor pools in summer, 1936 – 1940
Source: New York Municipal Archive

We see here that the pools always operated at a loss. But even with this loss, fee revenues filled that gap substantially, and the importance of this should not be underestimated.

In light of this, the biggest source of conflict within the Parks Department was over the free period for children, over which a slew of internal memos was exchanged, as well as surveys taken over many years. From the pools’ opening in 1936, through the 1970s, there was a free period on weekday mornings for children—and only children—who could not afford to pay the 10¢ fee; adults were not allowed in at these times. In addition to the regular fastidiousness over registering pool attendance, extra record keeping was done to see how many children came to the free period. Of even more concern to Parks administrators was the tendency of many children (though not all) to come to the free period, and then get back in line and pay their 10¢ to swim for the rest of the day. This conflict – and the more general question of free admission and for whom – would remain live for many years.
In Summer 1939, parents and child welfare advocates wrote in to the Parks department to request more free periods for children, or for season passes to lower the cost of regular pool attendance for children and adults. But a representative response to such a letter from Victor J. Jenkins, Supervisor of Park Operations was as follows:

The charges we make are very low and we must collect sufficient funds to pay for the upkeep of these facilities. You can readily see that any attempt at group or commutation rates would so reduce our revenues, that it would be impossible to collect sufficient funds to properly maintain the pools. (Jenkins, June 14, 1939)

Balancing the books was the most often cited reason for not expanding the free period, or offering other deals such as season passes. But this reason was more flexible than it would seem, recalling that the pools always operated at a loss.

In an internal memo from 1939, Parks officials surveyed Saturday morning attendance at eight pools in the poorest neighborhoods to see if they might support an extra free period at that time, in addition to the regular free periods on weekday mornings. They concluded,

If this period on Saturday mornings were made a free period, we would undoubtedly have one of the largest free periods of any day of the week, which would increase our operating expenses because it would necessitate a larger staff coming in Saturday morning to handle the increased load. It would reduce our income by [$530] (which would be too great a sum). (Jenkins, June 13, 1939)

The other part of this argument was that the weekend morning free period would cause a loss in revenue from paying adults who, the supervisors feared, “will not come back in the afternoon, but rather go to private pools” (Jenkins, June 26, 1939). In order to maximize revenue, the free period could not be expanded.

However, even after this memo came through, more back-and-forth ensued, and a different decision was made:
The swimming pools are receiving such little use on Saturday and Sunday mornings as pay periods, that it was decided to open them up for free periods to children the same as week days. During this free period no adults will be admitted to the pool. We feel that the pools will get greater usage on Saturday and Sunday mornings for this new ruling (Latham, July 1, 1939, emphasis added).

In this decision, the revenues that went to fund and maintain the pools were deemed less important than making the best use of the space.

Yet while a victory was had for children, parks officials remained insistent on not allowing adults in during free periods, even to accompany their own children. The rationale of revenue loss was, once again, central to this decision. In a memo to Commissioner Moses from earlier that summer, General Superintendent Allyn R. Jennings had insisted that

The loss of revenue from adults and children coming for the period between 10 and 12 on all the pools would.... Add up to more than $10,000. This might be the different between profit and loss for the season. (June 16, 1939)

Because revenue from adult attendance was needed to operate the pools, at least in the rhetoric, a system had to be maintained in which adults were not counted as legitimate recipients of a free period.

So, revenue considerations aside, why the insistence on not allowing adults in for free at any time? If we consider that the city’s municipal bathhouses (and, to some extent, the river

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66 There is also the question of a chaotic environment that must have ensued in an environment made up of only children. In Summer, 1950, after complaints from day camp staff that they were not able to help the children in and out of their swimsuits, or to supervise them in the water (Smith, July 26, 1950), the Parks Department stuck to its guns and continued to prohibit adults, because officials were sure that allowing everyone in would result in disorder. For reasons yet unclear, Parks finally reversed its decision on this issue somewhat in summer 1957, by choosing to allow in “teachers, summer camp counsellors, etc. accompanying groups of children to our swimming pools during this free period ... with the children free of charge, if the children are fourteen years of age and under.” But this courtesy would only be extended to organized groups: “parents or adult guardians coming with children may not accompany the children into the pool area” (Quigley, June 19, 1957).

67 A memo from June 11, 1940 indicates that “the question of admitting adults to the pools during the free period came up quite frequently in 1936 and 1937, but due to the policy that was established when the pools were opened and our continued refusal to allow them in, this demand has diminished to a great extent” (Latham, June 11, 1940).
baths) were still in regular use at the time, free of charge, we might understand the outdoor pools, for adult use, as an ‘extra’ that they could and ought to pay for. Adults, as potential wage earners, had to pay, but perhaps children were considered a special class who had little or no control over their ability to pay.

But regarding the free period for children, only two weeks later, on July 12, 1939, Parks reversed its decision yet again:

We experimented with the morning free period for children over two week-ends because of numerous requests on behalf of children who were not able to pay the required 10 cents. After objections from regular Sunday morning adult patrons of the pools, and because during this experimental operation the majority of children on Sunday mornings appeared to be able to pay, the operation has been put back on the former basis of no free periods on Sundays and holidays. The week-day free period for children will be continued on Saturday mornings. (Jennings, July 12, 1939)

Notices had begun to come in from people on the ground at the pools – lifeguards, managers, etc. – that many children were coming to the pay period and, when that ended and the pool was cleared, getting back in line to pay their 10 cents. In order to verify this, a survey of pools was conducted from the central office, administered by pool supervisors, to count how many children did in fact get back in line to pay after the free period. The survey found that at most pools, about half of the children got back in line, but at a few (Red Hook, McCarren, Crotona), they did not (Jenkins, July 19, 1939). More surveys were taken and more memos circulated to prove the point. One pool supervisor explains that he ran the survey “merely to show that a great many of them did have money to spend for their swimming” (Jennings, July 29, 1939). From this, Parks officials determined that most of the children were in fact able to pay, and were just taking advantage of the free time.
Of additional concern was that the children’s free period might be *causing* the loss of adult patrons:

Last Saturday, I had 900 children in the pool in the morning and it took over an hour and a half to get them out. In the meantime, the adult line had been forming since 11AM... I also noted that approximately 800 of the 900 children immediately joined the adult line for readmission to the pool on being let out after the free session. A line like this will undoubtedly cause the adults to seek some other place for recreation on Saturday. (Gilligan, July 11, 1939)

While Parks management was legitimately concerned about making their budget for the year, the internal exchange over extending the free period or not indicates there was also something that rankled many in the Parks administration about letting children in for free who could afford to pay their ten cents. They were taking advantage of the time set aside for the children who could not pay. Following this argument to its logical conclusion, this meant that the only children who *belonged* during the free period should have been the very poorest.

And while public opinion generally supported the pools, the fees continued to come up, such as in a July 20, 1939 Editorial in the *Times* which suggested that Parks was turning a profit on the pools through fee collection. This so much upset Parks Superintendent Allyn R. Jennings that he drafted a letter (never published) including Parks Department actuals, and closed with the following:

*We have scaled our fees down to the lowest possible minimum so that the greatest number of patrons can enjoy the 'dividends of happiness and health' without financial strain, and we staff them as economically as our high standards of operation will permit. We are not in business to make money on them; we want to operate all the revenue-producing facilities... so that their advantages are available to the public without any drain upon the taxpayers. (Jennings, July 20, 1939)*

Jenning’s point of distinction between ‘the public’ and ‘the taxpayers’ would echo in future arguments over this same issue, through the 1940s.
From an official standpoint, all of this concern seems to settle at the end of the season.

When Parks published a Press Release of pools attendance (a practice repeated at the end of most seasons through the 1960s), they remarked proudly on the expansion of the free period:

During the past season, 2,442,439 people have used the swimming pools, of which 860,216 were children admitted free of charge, 907,396 were children who paid 10¢ admission. This year, for the first time, Saturday morning was included in the free periods for children, giving them six mornings a week instead of the five free mornings they had last year.

Although the outdoor swimming pools will be closed, this does not mean the end of the swimming season as the Park Department operates six indoor swimming pools in Manhattan and one in Brooklyn, free of charge to the public.

(September 11, 1939)

Comparing this press release to the memos arguing over the children’s free period, it is notable how much internal strife resulted from this provision at the outdoor pools, but not the indoor pools. Indoor pools were fewer and less popular, and perhaps still associated with cleansing baths, so their mandate was certainly different. The conflict at the outdoor pools would continue for a number of years.

**Summer, 1940: Parks and the Coordinating Committee on Child Welfare**

At the beginning of the summer, 1940, an extensive exchange occurred between the Parks Department and the Coordinating Committee on Child Welfare (CCCW), a citywide philanthropic and advocacy organization. In this dispute, the CCCW offers that children, or at least the poorest children, be allowed into the pools free of charge at all times. In a memo from Parks to the CCCW, two different explanations are offered. The first reason is pragmatic:

It is not practical to operate for both free and pay customers at the same time; it would require additional personnel and it would complicate the operation to an extent which would overload an already inadequate budget.
But the explanation continues this time in a more ideological manner:

It would not be practical for the department to permit free use by children of families on relief outside of the regular free period because this would be class discrimination, which would arouse no end of public criticism. (Latham, July 5, 1940)

Once again, the reasoning that is offered is both budgetary and ideological. The CCCW responds, in turn, first with an argument about what is right for the people of New York City,

It has been the policy of the city for many, many years to offer educational, recreational and park facilities to New York residents at no cost to any individual. These services were part of the normal functions of the city and were extended to improve the health, education and well being of the people. We feel that the pools would be so much more useful to the children of New York City if the same principle was applied, namely that of free service to our children.

And then an argument about best and highest use:

We are confident that this policy would be only a small financial undertaking for the city which would make it possible to increase the attendance figures several millions more than the 2,465,707 of last season. (Harris, July 11, 1940)

And in response, the Commissioner offers the following:

The record of attendance at the pools for the 1939 season is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Attended</th>
<th>Revenue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children paid</td>
<td>898,672</td>
<td>$89,877.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adults paid</td>
<td>692,927</td>
<td>$138,885.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children free</td>
<td>878,151</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The budgetary funds made available for the maintenance and operation of the swimming pools and other revenue-producing facilities are appropriated by the Board of Estimate on the basis of the amount of revenue received from the

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68 This argument is repeated again, in a 1942 memo, in response to a request for a free pass to the pools. “Since these pools are operated on a self maintaining policy, it is imperative that we charge children nine cents and adults twenty-five cents after 1PM during the week and all day on Sundays and Holidays. To make an exception to this fee schedule for people who are on relief would be class discrimination and would increase the cost of operation” (Latham, July 28, 1942).
various facilities. Even with the nominal charges made at present, the revenue is inadequate for satisfactory maintenance and operation, and these facilities go in the red every year. Last year the revenue from children using the pools was approximately $90,000. This amount would have to be deducted from an already inadequate budget. (Moses, July 20, 1940)\textsuperscript{69}

What Moses says here is true: the pools had been operating at a substantial loss since they opened. But what constituted a substantial loss? And to whom did it matter?

\textit{The dispute continues}

It seems that, at a certain point, a decision would be made over (1) how many free periods there ought to be each week, and (2) to either ignore the children who got back in line to pay for swimming after the free period, or to prohibit them from coming back in. But, in fact, no decision was reached. An internal Parks memo from July 25, 1946, entitled “Free Period at Pools on Saturdays” once again requested to have the Pool Supervisors check to see how many of the children who attended for free got back in line to pay afterward (Latham, July 25, 1946). In Summer 1947, they revisit the question of the free period on Sundays, but the change once again requires that “each pool... keep an exact record as to the number of free admissions on Saturday forenoon and how many of those children align themselves immediately after departure, for readmittance with pay” (Podvinecz, June 30, 1947).\textsuperscript{70} A different administrator opens up the issue again in 1955, on the basis that the two-hour Saturday morning free period

\textsuperscript{69} An exception would be made in 1943 (and perhaps other years during WWII), in which the end-of-season attendance totals included 65,344 ‘Free Military’ attendees (compared with 410,049 ‘Free Child’ attendees) among a total of 1,996,921 patrons for the summer. While this is only 3% of total attendance (compared to 20% among free child admissions), the ideological decision to allow soldiers in free of charge is notable (Jacobi, 1944).

\textsuperscript{70} The other ‘solution’ that is proposed is “that the indoor pools which operate during the Summer, be opened on Sundays to underprivileged children, who cannot afford to pay admission to the outdoor pools, and in lieu of this, such pools be closed on Mondays.” (Podvinecz, June 30, 1947) That is to say, where poor children can’t be cordoned off by time, perhaps they ought to be cordoned off by space.
for children age 14 and under “seriously restricts the pool usage” for others, and furthermore, that “there are very few children in the pool during the free period on Saturday mornings” (Constable, July 12, 1955).

But the purpose of this counting exercise, which went on summer upon summer, was unclear. Would the Parks staff have preferred a session exclusively for very poor children? Would they have liked to see proof of sufficient poverty? This seems like an added administrative burden. What if having free time only for the very poorest children would have reduced attendance? In recounting these anxious memos (which would continue into the 1950s and 60s), it seems that some would have preferred such a system. Poor children were meant to belong to the space only at specific times of day. Their presence comprised a separate corporeal public at the times when they did not pay. In this way, Parks could fulfill its obligation to serve all New Yorkers, but those who could not pay would be regulated more closely.

The persistence, and demise, of the nominal fee

In 1973, municipal pool attendees in New York were still paying the same 10¢ for children and 25¢ for adults as they had paid in the 1930s when the pools opened (“Swimming Pool Season,” June 14, 1973). At this point, the fee could not have been covering much of the operating costs at all but this is, at least partially, the internal logic of the nominal fee: at a certain point, the dollar amount does not matter – it’s just important that currency is exchanged for entry.

A 1989 newspaper article mentions free pool admission for the first time, but other media records have been extremely difficult to find. This might be because Parks was still
undergoing great administrative difficulty in the 1980s, having been long underfunded, and did not have an active press department. It could have been, too, that the fee was laughable at that point, and so eliminating it didn’t raise any eyebrows. Still, this was a large and notable shift in the way the Parks department had thought about fees for many years.

In interviews, I asked Parks Department officials about the free pool. One speculated that the fiscal crisis precipitated the free pool:

And, a decision was made – my understanding – and this is something that was told to me – back in [the 1970s], to cancel the fee... First of all, it didn’t fund the pools. There was no way you were funding, based on a quarter, the whole operation in the pool. ... And it’s a service we’ve been providing free – to anybody who wants to come in – since that time. And that’s the overall reason for cancelling it. Cause parents and children that really couldn’t afford even that quarter couldn’t get into the pools. We stopped. And now... we’ve continued the policy, and we wouldn’t actually put the fee back in. It’s too great a service to the public. It’s too much of a need to ... think about how many people live in apartments that don’t have air conditioning and the only place for them to actually cool off is the public pool. They can’t afford the fees [at] places like the YMCA. (Interview, August 2, 2012)

Another offered that, although he liked that the pool was free, he would prefer a membership system with a card assigned to each attendee—harkening back to the free ticket required of each attendee at the floating baths—in order to keep troublemaking youth out of the pool after an offence. He conceded, however, that the administrative cost would be too great to bother.

When asked about charging a fee in order to support Parks budgets, he replied

There are problems any time you do that, you know, any time you have an exchange of money you have to have staff that are responsible and there’s always the... the inclination to dip into he kitty so you always have to have a level of oversight of that and then a level of oversight over the oversight. ... and plus, I mean, you know we can do it for free, so why not? (Interview, 2012)

But while the Parks Department charges liberally for use of tennis courts, ice skates and other recreational amenities, the free pool has conjured up its own logic, one which some Parks
officials support even as it goes against a tide of increasing privatization in other areas, particularly through conservancies and foundations.

Today, the outdoor pools are free all summer long, open from the day after public schools let out in the spring until the day they open again in the fall. The simple explanation here is that the pools are used as an inexpensive way to give children and teens something to do during the summer months so that they will ‘stay out of trouble.’ While that may be the logic behind the opening and closing dates in the eyes of the Department of Education and the police department (who have worked closely on the outdoor pools throughout their history), larger consequences and social lives result, perhaps enlarging the ways in which we are public.

Recreation centers

The City’s Recreation Centers have a separate, if related history of fees. From the time they opened as bathhouses in 1901 until 2002, all New York City recreation centers were free. 71 Twelve are equipped with pools, while thirty-seven are not, as there was never a comprehensive indoor pools program across the city.

In 2002, a $25 ‘donation’ was imposed on patrons, with the exception of the five recreation centers in the poorest neighborhoods. But the real blow came in 2006: a fee hike to $50 membership arose, which included the neighborhoods that had remained exempt until that time (Chan, 2006). This lead to a 50% drop in attendance at the recreation centers overall, from 21,100 adults per year to 11,500 adults (Williams, 2007).

71 Gutman (2007, in Ballon and Jackson, p. 157) says entry fees were charged for the bathhouses, but does not cite a source.
Over time, the fee rose to $75, and in 2011, the Parks Department once again doubled the fee for all adults at the recreation centers with pools to $150/year for adults (and $25/year for seniors, while youth admission remained free) to exactly the same end.

![Fig 3.2: Municipal recreation Center Memberships](image)

*Source: New York City Independent Budget Office*

In a repeat of the 2006 fee hike, a 2013 report by the Independent Budget Office showed that “the department had projected a decrease of 5 percent in memberships in the first year after the fees doubled; instead, almost half of the adult and senior members did not renew. Similarly, the department had hoped to realize $4 million in new revenue, but in fact, it lost about $200,000” (Foderaro, 2013).\(^{72}\)

While Parks Department officials repeatedly told me in interviews that the recreation centers are ‘a steal’ in comparison with a private gym, the fees are a hardship for many New Yorkers who need them most; at the time of the most recent fee hike, almost half of New Yorkers who need them most; at the time of the most recent fee hike, almost half of New

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\(^{72}\) In response to this drop, in summer 2013, the Parks Department launched a new fee bracket for the recreation centers: 18 – 24 year olds could join ‘for only $25 a year.’
Yorkers lived at or near the poverty line (Roberts, 2013). Meanwhile, the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene has launched a campaign urging residents to “Make NYC Your Gym” by using the outdoor spaces of the city. This infographic tells us that more than half of NYC adults are overweight; we know that the poorest populations are also those at highest risk of obesity.

While walkable, bikeable cities have been shown to improve the health of all residents, in this case, the fees demonstrate to the New Yorkers that cannot afford membership (and who may need it most) that they do not belong to some public spaces, all the while entreat them to take advantage of the other spaces of the city in a place with a long, cold winter.

**Conclusion**

Fees are a mechanism of regulation that designate which bodies belong in bathing spaces together at what times. The fee can have at least three effects. First, and most evident,
charging people can regulate who comes in and who does not, most often according to the classes of ‘adults’ and ‘children.’ Second, and an adjunct to the first, a free period in relation to a fee, while meant to broaden access, limits the poorest people to the most bounded space and time. In the extended case above, regarding the children’s free period, the tendency of many children to break those boundaries by going to both free and pay periods broke those boundaries, causing anxiety among those agents of the state who saw themselves as providing a service to people who could not otherwise participate as the public. Third, by charging no fee at all, a public of a certain space—the pool in this case—might lose some of the privileges of patronage (i.e. the space can be very restrictive), or the space can take on an identity associated with a low class of people.

A long history of ambivalence over whether or not to charge a fee for service is part of the history of the pools and baths in New York. For much of the second half of the nineteenth century, those who promoted a fee for entry believed that payment, of even a small amount, would teach very poor people the value of the service they were getting at the baths. However, when the municipal bathhouses were built, in 1901, they fell under New York State legislation that required there to be no fee for entry; instead, they charged for a towel and soap.

Beginning in the 1930s, when the outdoor pools were first constructed, there was a fee, but the rationale was most often over balancing the Parks Department budget. Throughout the 1940s, different members of the central staff of the Parks Department were very concerned over whether or not to charge a fee, and when, and ended up with some free periods for children. Perhaps more important than the resultant number of free hours per week is the
concern over who has the right to that time, and what it means for someone to ‘take’ it who can get back in line to pay.

In the 1980s, fees for the outdoor pools in the summer were done away with altogether, but in the mid aughts, fees were imposed for the recreation centers, which were now housed in the bathhouse buildings. Today we have two models of fees and belonging operating side by side: rec centers that charge and exclude poor people, and outdoor pools in the summer that don’t charge and are associated with poor youth.

Each of these shifts in fees has a social rationale that far exceeds the economy of supporting the Parks Department operating budget. Each brings to the forefront a question of the extent to which public space is ‘given’ by the state, and the ways that fees operate outside of the logic of monetary value and seep into social questions of who belongs to the public.

Regulation of access is one way in which the municipal bathing project mediates social life in public spaces. While fee payment in the present day, is not limited to the pools—New York residents pay for golf, tennis, and the reservation of some ball fields, among other spaces—the contests here represent the mechanisms by which fees are imposed, and the resilience that they maintain once they appear. Those fees limit access for some groups, in terms of physical entry as well as belonging; thus, participation in the public spaces of the city is limited in some way. Although raising municipal revenue is a perennial given reason to charge a fee, its rationale has been undone at least once, as shown here.
Chapter Four – Learning to Swim

So there is really little or nothing that man has been able to borrow from the rest of the animal kingdom in the development of his own peculiar art of swimming. Slowly and patiently over the centuries he has had to discover his own principles and methods. (Bryant, 1938, *Swimming and Diving*, p. 4)

A central element of the municipal bathing project, in addition to cleansing, has been the repeated rise and fall of state-funded swimming lessons, at times out of concern for getting people fewer people to drown, at other times to promote physical fitness, a term that has layered meanings – strength, responsibility, and both personal and national health. At times, swimming lessons have also justified the investment in, and continued material support of, capital-intensive state spaces designed around play, leisure, and cooling such as in the case of the river baths. In the 1940s through the 1960s, in New York as well as many other US cities, learning to swim was part of the program of public education, echoing the earlier call for bathing and hygiene to be taught in public schools and showers to be installed in buildings.

Currently swim instruction is not a national, nor a New York City, mandate. Yet teaching New Yorkers, especially children, to swim has consistently been present at the baths and pools, co-constructed as a goal for bodies within the social infrastructure of public bathing.

The decision to build and maintain public baths and then pools in New York—and other American Cities—shows an attempt to define what it means to have a healthy body, what time spent in the water ought to be *for*, and how these two meaning-making operations go together. Teaching swimming has been central to this effort to delineate the healthy body, as its meaning has changed over the course of different eras. Like in the case of building, the ideals around

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73 In many European countries today, including the Netherlands, learning to swim is required by law, either through in-school classes or after-school swimming lessons at state-owned facilities.
teaching swimming do not shift cleanly from one to the next over time, but rather coexist (and sometimes disappear and reappear.) These are lifesaving, health and hygiene, and leisure.

Foremost, the rationale for all swimming instruction is lifesaving: drowning deaths are largely preventable, partly through individual skill in swimming. This rationale consistently trumps athletic competition, leisure, or just about any other explanation for why people ought to learn to swim. In 1914, Commodore Wilbert E. Longfellow established the Red Cross water safety program, the predecessor of the swimming and lifesaving badge programs that are widely used today (Spears and Swanson, 1978); this was the first widespread effort to, as he put it, ‘waterproof’ America. These techniques include protocols for group water safety, including buddy swimming and lifeguarding, as well as ‘drownproofing’ procedures, or knowing how to save oneself in an emergency situation (Bettsworth, 1977).

Health and hygiene—the processes and practices that lead to health—are another motivation for swimming lessons. A strong technical stroke makes the swimmer not only able to save herself, but to use the water as a place for exercise, increasing the muscle tone and lung capacity of the body. But knowing how to swim, today, also fulfills a middle-class notion of exercise that the individual might choose to participate in for her own health. A corollary, particularly for young people, is the ability to participate on a swim team, and all the ways in which participation in team sports are meant to increase well-being and character. In addition to increasing strength or competing, swimming is a ‘lifetime sport’ which one can participate in into old age, and is therapeutic for body and mind.

Finally, the ability to swim makes it possible to partake of aquatic settings for leisure— including vacations, beach time, and boating. The summer vacation swimming pool or beach
idyll is based in this comfort around water: the desire to submerge oneself in water life for a whole afternoon, or to go to a pool party.\textsuperscript{74} As vacation travel has become part of a middle-class (or aspirational middle class) lifestyle since the post-war period, water activities have become synonymous with leisure.

These three reasons for swimming, and thus for swim lessons—lifesaving, health, and leisure—allow each person to interact broadly with the water environment, built or natural. Thus, the ability to swim putatively widens a person’s dominion and access to different parts of the world. I use the story of changes in the provision of swimming lessons—both inside and outside of school hours—in order to consider what ‘knowing how to swim’ means, both pragmatically and philosophically. To this end I ask, what does knowing how to swim look and feel like? What is the nature of that knowing in a swimming body? Who is entitled to this ability, and of whom is it required? What does ‘knowing how to swim’ mean in the cultural sense? Is the ability to swim beyond saving oneself a class conceit—or, to whom is this skill important? Who learns and who doesn’t? To what extent? How come? And what happens outside of and beyond swimming lessons that cultivates these swimming bodies, that produces a more or less skilled ‘animal nature’ in the water?

The current menu of swimming lessons in New York City includes a combination of private club lessons that require memberships at venues such as gyms, sports clubs and ethnic community centers (JCCs and others) – often at high cost; private club lessons that require memberships with lower prices and broader access (i.e. YMCAs); and lessons provided by the

\textsuperscript{74} Many informants, including members of the HHBs and adult swim class participants at McCarren pool, noted that being able to swim would make them feel safer on a cruise, or in another vacation venue.
city, coordinated by the Parks Department or the Department of Education (DOE), most often free or at low-cost. Analogous to building, municipal swimming lessons also always intervene in a landscape of other types of lesson provision; in this case, the tiers have the added effect of enforcing a classed system.

City-run swimming lessons at present take a few forms. In-school lessons are available only at some of the public schools that have and maintain their on-site pools (which are very few compared to the number of schools in the city); Swim for Life, currently a pilot program for second graders at pools near their schools operates in city and DOE pools, as well as some YMCAs and private sports clubs; the municipal recreation centers of the Parks Department offer a number of levels of classes (both weekly and intensive, such as over spring break), and some sponsor swim teams; finally, the Parks Department offers summer swim classes at the outdoor pools in the summer for children and for adults – these are consistently oversubscribed. The Harlem Honeys and Bears (see Chapter Six) also offer their own lessons to neighborhood youth—particularly Black youth—even as the Parks Department offers swim lessons at their local recreation center. This is, to my knowledge, an anomalous case, if an important one, in exposing the often-invisible cultural milieu of swimming lessons.

In the course of public provision, swimming lessons have been attributed particular characteristics in order to achieve social goals. In this chapter, I first outline the given reasons for swimming lessons over the course of the municipal bathing project. Next, I tell the story of municipal swimming lesson provision in New York City over time, including those lessons given by the Parks Department and the Board of Education, in indoor, school-building, and outdoor pools. Third, I address the contemporary concern over the high rates of drowning among Black
and Latino youth. Finally, I explore the current program for teaching second graders to swim in New York City Public Schools – Swim for Life.

In the history offered here, there are many gaps in the record of provision of swimming lessons by the state. This is due both to gaps in the years that lessons were on offer, and to holes in the archival sources. This uneven provision of services over time demonstrates that comprehensive swimming lessons have not necessarily always been understood as the regular remedy to drowning deaths, nor has swimming been consistently understood as part of a fundamental education in the United States (as it has in many countries of Northern Europe). This is a clue that learning to swim, while an important safeguard against drowning, does not have a straightforward consensus around its purpose, particularly in the eyes of elites and decision-makers.

The rise of swimming lessons

Beginning in the mid-19th century, reformers in England and in other parts of Europe, become interested in the health benefits of swimming, for muscular strength and tone, as well as for its calming effects (Gordon and Inglis, 2009) The title of one 1849 publication—*The science of swimming: as taught and practiced in civilized and savage nations; with particular instruction to learners: also showing its importance in the preservation of health and life*—is representative of a discourse of ‘science’ which appears often in the swimming literature in subsequent years. In an interview with a swimming expert in the New York Times, in 1886, the writer insists, “To swim as a mere source of amusement is one thing, but to reduce it to a
science is another. Swimming does not differ from other athletic exercises; it can be made a science and it ought to be” (“Advice About Swimming,” March 21, 1886).

Swimming lessons in Europe began as a conceit of the wealthy who, in the middle of the 19th century, had begun to enjoy beach vacations on the coasts of European countries (Luehrig, 1939, p. 21). Like in Europe, wealthy Americans had access to swimming lessons in the mid-19th century, but free swimming lessons for working class people in New York City caught on with the rise of the floating bath. Part of the growth in popularity of swimming was due to a single athletic celebrity of the late 19th century, the swimmer Kate Bennett, who “almost singlehandedly made swimming fashionable and was personally responsible for teaching two generations of New York women to swim” (Bier, 2011, p. 15)\(^7\) and who “at some point during the 1870s ...was hired as a pool attendant and swimming teacher for the city baths as well as at her private school” (Bier, 2011, p. 25). By her example, both girls and boys took up swimming as a hobby and as an athletic pursuit.

The movement for Muscular Christianity had taken hold in the mid-19th century as well, exemplified by organizations such as the YMCA (Lupkin, 2010) and the development of the first modern Olympic Games. From the premise that participation in sport could bring together Christian morals, a masculine nature, and physical fitness, “the birth of Muscular Christianity in nineteenth century public schools has been one of the most significant factors in the development of sport and physical training in our modern education system" (Watson, Weir, & Friend, 2005, p. 7). Gagen (2004) argues, however, that while organizations such as the YMCA and the Boy Scouts were geared towards older, middle class youth, tropes of physical exercise

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\(^7\) A different female swim celebrity, Annette Kellerman, known for both her athleticism and her outspokenness, would bring the one-piece swimsuit into fashion in the early 20th century.
for good character in poor working class children were more readily found in the playground movement, where “play and recreation became the route through which immigrant children would acquire and, more importantly, embed the qualities necessary for American citizenship” (p. 431). A combination of these ideologies—the moral Christian body and mind, combined with the fit citizen—crept into the ideals of popular physical education as a whole.

According to the many swim manuals of the late 19th and early 20th century, the ability to swim would make better citizens, and stronger soldiers – and even women could participate (Brewster, 1918; Cross, 1906; Gerhard, 1908; Kellerman, 1918)! One early 20th century swim manual goes so far as to describe swimming as “increasing [the swimmer’s] power both for good and against evil” (Corsan, 1910, p. 4). The variety of philosophies of the supposed benefits of fortifying the body that were incorporated into swimming lessons for youth (and sometimes adults) in American cities help to explain how public space has been imagined through educating bodies in this way.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, recreation and sport were part of the academic discussion about cities and city planning, focusing on the ill effects the city might have on the well being of the laboring classes. In a special issue on Public Recreation Facilities of The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science (1910), planner Charles Mulford Robinson wrote “As to learning to swim and dive and float, knowledge of real value, that is part of the game, and, for all its value, may be classed with the lessons in other sports” (p. 135, emphasis added).

Swim lessons were sponsored by many organizations. "The YMCA initiated the first national program to teach vast numbers of people to swim and during the years 1909 through
1917 about 376,000 persons were taught swimming and diving” (Spears and Swanson, 1978, p. 167). The Red Cross would remain a vital organization as well, trying to pull together the Parks Department, YMCAs, the Boys and Girls Clubs and other organizations to promote swim instruction. By midcentury, a newspaper photo spread declares that “Through the efforts of such organizations as the Red Cross, the Boy Scouts, the YMCA, of summer camps and public parks programs, it is almost impossible for a boy or girl to grow up today without knowing how to swim” (“Schools for Swimmers,” July 22, 1956).

The National Swim For Health Association also stepped in for a time in the 1940s. In a pamphlet featuring parents and children swimming together in a neatly tiled pool, they suggest that “All swimming pools should promote swimming classes for youngsters,” which should be FREE. The purpose of these is that “Clean, healthy exercise of this kind will help BUILD A YOUNGSTER. It will keep the children off the streets. It will cut down on JUVENILE DELINQUENCY” (Stern, 1946).

Fig. 4.1 Swim For Health Week, 1946
Source: New York Municipal Archive (Stern, Martin, 1946)
Although it is not clear how large an organization this was, the Swim for Health Association’s executive director, Martin Stern, proved to be extremely successful in promoting a week of swimming at municipal pools in cities across North America, as demonstrated by letters to the editor and articles from Spokane, Washington to Richmond, Virginia.

But even with all of these perfectly good reasons for learning to swim, the question of who was responsible for supporting a comprehensive program of swim lessons remained. When the ability to swim is seen as an antidote to drowning, it can be conceptualized as a public health measure. At other times, it is understood as part of a whole system of education that includes the body of the child, and is therefore taught in school as part of a curriculum by the Department of Education.

**Municipal provision of Swim lessons in New York City**

In New York City, the first large-scale program of municipal swim lessons originated in the river baths. These largely disappeared with the rise of the indoor bath houses, and then re-emerged in the late 1930s, partially as a new raison d’etre for the old bathhouse buildings—now recreation centers—but also as new ideas about the educated person, and the educated body, came in. At certain points, the bulk of municipal swimming lessons were transferred to the public education system, leaving much of the time at the floating baths, the indoor pools, and the outdoor pools devoted to unstructured play (with the possibility of competitive
swimming.)\textsuperscript{76} Since the 1930s, swim lessons have been distributed between the Department of Education and the Department of Parks in different periods and seasons.

\textit{Board of Education}

By 1900, swimming lessons were offered for free at all eleven floating baths, for boys and girls, costing the city $3000 per season (“City’s Swimming Schools,” September 23, 1900). These were part of “the system of vacation schools and play centres managed by the Committee of Special Schools of the Board of Education”\textsuperscript{77} in which 52 swimming instructors sent to the river baths by the Board of Education offered swimming lessons 830 am - 1230 pm six days per week (“A Dry Swim,” July 19, 1903). Although the river baths were meant by their advocates to be venues primarily for cleaning and cooling, journalist Ralph D. Paine noted in 1905 that “the floating houses are really ‘swimming pools,’ for instructors paid by the Board of Education to teach the rudiments of swimming to all who apply, and every year sees an army of swimmers turned out by these free schools” (p. 11). In the period from the decline of the river baths due to pollution and disinvestment (beginning in about 1910) to the time that the Moses pools were built (1936), the city offered swim lessons in a more scattershot manner.

\textsuperscript{76} At times, however, various pro-swim departments and organizations worked together. The Board of Education paid for swim instruction in the river baths from the 1880s through the 1900s (“A Dry Swim,” July 19, 1903). And in mid-century, a memo from Parks states that “Mr. Hubbard, of the Board of Education, present at the [Red Cross] meeting [in May 1947] was also present at the meeting in 1939 or 1940 in the Arsenal Building, when the [Learn to Swim] campaign was organized and given its initial impetus by the Park Department with the help of other allied organizations” (Kenny, May 24, 1947).

\textsuperscript{77} Only five years later, the \textit{Times} would report “The United States Volunteer Life Saving Corps is teaching swimming in the free floating baths of the city. It has a set of experienced teachers, and many hundreds of children are taking advantage of the opportunity” (“Free Swimming Lessons,” July 13, 1905). (I have not yet found sources on this shift in programmatic responsibility, nor who funded it.) Yet in the summer of 1910, it is once again reported “swimming instructors will be furnished by the Board of Education to instruct both the girls and boys” (“Free Bath Season,” July 2, 1910).
The Board of Education has had a long involvement with the municipal bathing project, both independently and in cooperation with other city agencies. In addition to providing swim instructors at the municipal baths, they had begun to install bathing apparatus in school buildings around the same time that the first indoor municipal baths were being built; some schools appointed showers beginning in 1901 (Renner, 2008, p. 521, footnote 51). Swimming instruction was first included in the regular curriculum of the New York City Public Schools in 1908.

Swimming becomes this afternoon a part of the curriculum of the physical culture department of the public school system. From to-day on boys in this department will be taught to swim, dive, float, and finally life saving at the Public Baths Twenty-third Street and Avenue A. (“To Teach Pupils to Swim,” May 19, 1908).

Lessons for children were offered in tandem at in-school pools, and at recreation centers, depending on location and year. According to a 1942 memo by Robert Moses to the Board of Estimate regarding budget cuts, 185,000 children were receiving “regular swimming instruction arranged in cooperation with the Board of Education” at the time (Moses, April 16, 1942). In 1956 the pool at 134th Street (now Hansborough pool), for instance, saw “approximately 300 school children a week during the school year” (Quigley, April 23, 1956).

Records show 20 pools in public schools by 1935; by 1945, 37 (of 900) schools in the city had pools, but a newspaper report offers, “several years ago the education board decided to eliminate pools in new buildings. This policy, adopted because it was felt that pools were ‘frills’ that might well be discontinued as an economy measure, created a minor controversy in school

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78 These school baths persisted into the 1920s, when the *Times reported that* “Manhattan now has but thirteen schools in which there are ten or more showers, the service finds, and the only school now being built in which showers are contemplated is PS 182 in Brooklyn” (“For School Shower Baths,” February 13, 1921).

79 Although girls had long been taught to swim at the floating baths, this article makes no mention of girls being part of this program, nor of future swim lessons for them.
circles at the time” (“School Pools Proposed,” December 16, 1945). Some conflict continued over building pools in schools well into the 1950s. At the opening ceremonies for the Bronx High School of Science, in 1956, a Bronx member of the Board of Education, Charles Bensley, called for pools to be built in all new high schools, and for the appropriation of funds from the Parks department that were meant for construction of more outdoor pools as, he asserted, this would be a better use (“High School Pools,” November 1, 1956). At least fifty pools were eventually built in New York City public schools up through the 1950s; today, according to data from the Department of Buildings, at least 35 still exist. Regardless of the details of pool siting, it was never possible to build a pool in every (or even most) public schools, and so swimming lessons would always remain uneven unless there was a programmatic initiative by a particular school administration.

In Summer, 1934, the Parks Department announced a new program— a week of free swim lessons in July, every morning from nine to noon, at indoor pools in public and private schools around the city, including thirty-one Board of Education pools (“City to Give Lessons,” June 30, 1934). The lessons were so well attended that they were expanded for the whole month of July for both children and adults (“’Swim Week Extended,’ ” July 16, 1934). That first year, over 5,000 children received instruction, and of those 650 graduated the course by a swim

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80 In the same year, a summer swim program was also piloted at the two extant pre-WPA outdoor pools at Faber Park (Staten Island) and Betsy Head Park (Brooklyn) for three weeks. As if unconvinced that the program will work, one JV Mulholland tells his colleagues to “please be sure and get the names and addresses of those who did not know how to swim before the Campaign began, and keep the records of whether they did actually learn to swim at the end of the three weeks” (Mulholland, June 21, 1935).

81 A later edition mentions only twenty-two pools (“Learn-to-SwimWeek,” July 10, 1934) – some public and some private.
test (“650 Children,” August 1, 1934).82 (The disparity between the popularity of the program and the low ‘graduation’ rates perhaps indicates a desire to play in the water, but less desire to engage voluntarily in long-term formal instruction.)

The Department of Health was also interested in preventing drownings, but took a slightly different tack. In 1937 – 8, in the Yorkville district of Manhattan, the Department of Health (DOH) piloted “an intensive campaign with children from public schools and playgrounds, teaching them the dangers of East River swimming and taking steps to make available to them the existing neighborhood pools” (Arnold, 1939). The DOH, in turn, got local YMCAs and settlement houses with pools to allow local children in so that they might swim supervised. In 1939, the DOH began its own Learn to Swim campaign which, they claim in their records (through it is contradicted in other places) “was the forerunner of a city-wide drive conducted the Park Department” in which 244 children learned to swim (Arnold, 1939).

Swimming lessons at the WPA Pools

The Parks Department introduced swimming lessons on a larger scale in 1938, which they offered for free during a month of the summer at the outdoor pools.83 During the free children’s swim period on weekday mornings, lessons for children were offered, while adults

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82 A tangential debate ensued at this time over who presided over the public school pools, and who should be making decisions about whether or not to include them in the infrastructure and curriculum of the schools. In 1938, Commissioner Moses excoriated the Board of Education for making its (then) twenty pools unavailable to the public outside of school hours (“Moses Protests,” August 15, 1938).

83 Although Parks had taken over Manhattan’s bathhouses from the office of the Borough President in 1938, many pools were yet to be installed, and those extant throughout the boroughs were badly in need of repair (Moses, 1939). At this time, bathhouses still belonged either to the health department, or to the offices of the Borough Presidents (Department of Parks, June 30, 1939).
and older children could have free lessons but had to attend during the appropriate times of day and pay admission.

In a May 25, 1939 press release, “The Department of Parks announces that the second annual ‘Learn to Swim’ Campaign will commence in all Park Department swimming pools on Monday, June 5th, and continue through Saturday, June 24th.” The expansion of the program was, officially, a response to the 339 drowning deaths in New York City the previous year. At the time, drowning ranked as third among causes of accidental death in the United States, and its victims were most frequently between 12 and 19 years old. (This was not much reduced from the rate when the City had decided to install the river baths, seventy years prior.) By the end of June, 1939 close to 3000 children had registered for the program, and the Parks department estimated “that about 90% of the group will be able to swim at the end of the campaign.” Five hundred adults had also registered (Press Release, Department of Parks, May 25, 1939).

In a smaller campaign, as the municipal bathhouses had been transferred to the Department of Parks from the Department of the Borough President (at least in Manhattan), and renovated in the years 1938 – 40, swimming and life-saving lessons for advanced swimmers were offered free of charge (Press Release, Department of Parks, March 11, 1940). Although there is scant record of the program, it seems that in the off-season for a number of years, instructors were available at the Rec Center pools during the week (“12 Swimming Pools,” September 12, 1950). No fee was charged at this time, as there was no admission fee for the Recreation Centers until 2002.
The program grew each year\textsuperscript{84}, and by the summer of 1946, ten years after the WPA pools opened, Learn to Swim was "conducted in each one of the 17 Park Department outdoor swimming pools starting July 8\textsuperscript{th} and continuing until August 30\textsuperscript{th}" (Downing, 1946).\textsuperscript{85}

This long period – more than a month and a half, as compared to the three weeks of 1939, demonstrated an increased seriousness and investment of resources in teaching the city's children to swim, with multiple skill levels represented and rewarded (Downing, 1946).\textsuperscript{86}

\textsuperscript{84} In Summer 1944, the "Learn to Swim" campaign posters included the national health, with the line "Keep Fit For Defense. Learn to Swim Campaign, June 20 – July 20."

\textsuperscript{85} Learn to Swim was also an early Parks Department foray into corporate sponsorship. By 1946, the Daily Mirror Newspaper was the co-sponsor of the lessons, helping out with printing costs for posters (Downing, 1946) and getting "silver and gold-filled pins for swimmers who qualify in test No. 2 as intermediate swimmers and test No. 3 as advanced swimmers" (Downing, 1947). (Corporate sponsorship would come in again for expansion of summer programs during the Lindsay administration.)

\textsuperscript{86} In a curious contribution to the war effort, in 1943, a press release announced "the Department of Parks announces that a 'Learn to Swim' campaign for men of the Merchant Marine will begin immediately at the indoor swimming pools under its jurisdiction. The importance of swimming for this branch of the service is universally recognized. The United merchant Seamen's Service and the Seamen's Institute have indorsed [sic] this campaign as an important asset to the national effort... All seamen are invited to attend. There will be no fee of any kind. Instructions in swimming will also be free" (Press Release, Department of Parks, February 21, 1943).
In this era, Learn to Swim really took off, with the Parks Department now publishing a press release at the end of the swim season, stating how many young people enrolled in the program. Lessons continued to be offered for free, during the free children’s swim period; this is particularly notable in an era when Parks records show a department obsessed with the pools generating revenue to balance their own capital outlay. A decade later, in 1955, end-of-season press releases from the Parks Department reported that 7,500 children had participated in the instructional swimming program that year; adult classes were also available, if less well attended (Jenkins, August 29, 1955).

I have not uncovered the exact year that lessons stopped being offered in the public outdoor pools, but they seem to have slowly folded sometime in the 1960s and to have been picked back up when, in Summer 1971, three pools in Brooklyn and Queens offered lessons for the last month of the summer before school opened – this is also the period when attendance at the pools usually lags somewhat (“3 Pools,” August 15, 1971). The uneven availability of records on this topic points either to lessons being cut, or to a less self-promoting Parks Department.

The next mention (in the newspapers and archives that I accessed) of free swim lessons at the outdoor pools in the summer appears more than twenty years later, in 1996, when both the Parks Department and the City Council were offering swim lessons at different pools, some in Manhattan and others in the outer boroughs. (This does not necessarily mean, however, that no lessons were offered in the interim.) "The Department of Parks and Recreation and the City Parks Foundation are offering free 'learn to swim' classes for children between ages 3 and 14, at five Manhattan pools. The City Council is also offering free swimming instruction for children
at three recreation centers, in the Bronx, Brooklyn and Manhattan" ("Free Lessons," February 4, 1996). Once again, the city seemed to be cobbling together lessons among various departments, rather than offering a comprehensive swim program.

A robust program of municipally funded (and mostly free) instruction existed in the New York City pools in two periods, through a combination of the Board of Education (late 19th century) and the Parks Department (1930s – 1960s.) These were also periods when big investments were being made in municipal infrastructure; one could surmise that, in this zeitgeist, investments were also being made in the bodies of the users, in the act of co-construction.

Today, we see a growing interest in swimming lessons from different corners of the city, culminating in the 2011 formation of the NYC Swim Council, which “will work as an advocate for drowning prevention: emphasizing raising funds, identifying resources, and coordinating services to teach water safety to every second grader in NYC public schools” (NYC Parks, 2011). Among other reasons his is largely out of concern for widely publicized high rates of drowning among Black and Latino children in the United States.87

Drowning and swimming among Black and Latino Youth

A growing literature attempts to explain the stubborn rates of drowning88 among Black and Latino youth, boys especially, who drown two to three times as much as their White

87 “Though injury is the leading cause of death among children aged 1 to 12 in NYC, the City’s rate is less than half that of the United States,” (p. 2) and NYC Children in fact die from drowning at a rate of .1 per 100,000, which is less than the national rate of 1.4 per 100,000 (DiGrande, Yao, & Fortin, 2012).

88 These studies often don’t account for near-fatal drownings, “many of which leave children with permanent disabilities” (Brenner, 2003).
counterparts (Laosee, Gilchrist, & Rudd, 2012).\textsuperscript{89} One commonsense explanation is that Black children drown because they don’t know how to swim, as they are not taught how to swim\textsuperscript{90} at the same rate as White youth — a skill that requires, at the very least, resources of time and money. As Wiltse (2014) and others (Brenner, et al., 2009; Hastings, Zahran, & Cable, 2006; Irwin, Irwin, Ryan, & Drayer, 2009b) point out, although this is not an empirically conclusive argument, it seems to be correlative\textsuperscript{91}, and thus is taken as the premise for a lot of money, energy and programming directed at teaching Black and Latino youth to swim.\textsuperscript{92} Brenner, et al. (2009), however, found that while formal swimming instruction reduces the likelihood of drowning for children aged 1 – 4 by 88%, they “found no statistically significant association between formal swimming lessons and drowning risk in older children or between informal swimming instruction and drowning risk at any age” (p. 209). Further, and somewhat confounding, “How swimming ability relates to drowning is unknown, despite consistent recommendations for swimming instruction as a key preventable step” (Irwin, et al., 2009b, p. 237).

(Some qualifications to these studies are important in order to proceed. First: among all drowning deaths, 0 – 19, males make up 80% of the victims. The reasons that girls don’t

\textsuperscript{89} Drowning rates for children aged 0 – 19 have decreased by half overall in the United States in the past twenty years (Bowman, Aitken, Robbins, & Baker, 2012).

\textsuperscript{90} “Importantly, even among older children, knowing how to swim well in one body of water does not always make a child safe in another, and even the best swimmers are not “drown-proof” (Brenner, 2003, p. 443).

\textsuperscript{91} Some authors make strong arguments in favor of correlation, at least at the level of populations: “Mortality rates are lower in areas where rates of swimming participation are comparatively high. Insofar as rates of swimming participation are a partial reflection of swimming infrastructure, residents in areas of comparatively lower rates of unintentional drowning have greater access to swimming instruction” (Hastings, et al., 2006, p. 910).

\textsuperscript{92} Also: Black and Latino youth have markedly different cultural reasons for not knowing how to swim, and these statistics also vary within group based on SES, country of origin, geography inside the US, etc. For the purposes of these kinds of studies, the only real commonality is a high drowning rate. (Berukoff and Hill (2010) provide some insights into Latino/a youth more specifically.) I have found no studies on the tendency to drown among poor White youth, who I suspect may have high rates of drowning as well.)
drown—and minority girls don’t drown at higher rates in spite of, statistically being the highest risk group (Irwin, 2009)—are unclear. Rates of drowning for children are greatest from 0 – 4, when they drown at home, often in bathtubs or buckets. We see this as cases of drowning actually ‘flip’ for White and Black Boys around four years old - right around the time that White children begin to go for their first swim lessons (Hastings, et al., 2006).

All of these studies demonstrate a racist disparity that not only limits the opportunities for different groups of children to enjoy the natural and built environment around them, but also are a matter of life and death. Gilmore (2007) defines racism as “the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death” (p. 28). Important in this definition is that racism is a system of power, which is not simply about the fact of individual actors people treating other people badly, or causing them indignity, but that racism very directly affects people’s quality and length of life. If racism is a whole system of power, then one must consider not only what keeps Black children from being able to survive in the water, but also the systems of power that are keeping them out.

Citing Irwin (2008 and 2010), Myers and Cuesta (2012) noted that “Even if one were to establish unambiguously a causal link between African Americans’ poor swimming ability and their high rates of drowning, there is still the problem of explaining why [Black people] do not swim” (p. 2). Without deriding the goal of teaching all children to swim, the promotion of these kinds of programs (including Swim for Life, below) raises questions such as: what does it mean to know how to swim? Irwin et al.’s oft-cited study at the University of Memphis (2008), commissioned by USA Swimming, looked at the demographic breakdown of swimming ability in...
the US, and offers that the greatest indicators of youth swimming ability are family income\textsuperscript{93} (wealth correlates highly with swimming ability) and whether or not other members of the household, especially parents, know how to swim. In follow-up report by the same team (2010) in which they focused more on why Black and Latino children don’t participate in swimming, they found that fear of water and of drowning had a greater impact than cost on participation, that proximity\textsuperscript{94} to a swim facility was not as big a factor as previously thought, and that individual appearance (more among girls than boys) was a significant factor.

Saluja, et al., (2006) add to this, by considering the circumstances under which different demographic groups drown, finding that “Black victims were more likely to drown in public pools, Hispanic\textsuperscript{95} victims were more likely to drown in neighborhood/apartment pools, and White victims were more likely to drown in residential pools. Black victims drowned in hotel/motel pools more often than they drowned in any other type of pool” (p. 731). The authors go on to point out that these pools tend not to have lifeguards, thus indicating a major factor outside of individual swimming ability.

While Black boys drown at a greater rate than any other group, Irwin, Irwin, Ryan, & Drayer (2011) ask the following about Black girls’ swimming ability:

\begin{quote}
African American females experience some of the lowest fatal drowning rates of all groups measured in [a 2008 CDC study]. Therefore, can this culturally specific “fear” be decoded as appropriate “respect” for the hazards that can be faced
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{93} The exception to this is that high income White children in affluent communities have higher-than-average rates of drowning if there is a high density of backyard swimming pools. (Brenner, 2003, p. 440)

\textsuperscript{94} Although proximity isn’t necessarily the primary causal factor, Taylor et al. (2007) and Wolch et al. (2007) point out that larger issues of environmental justice persist both in terms of Parks and Recreation facilities siting, and in terms of the quality of those facilities.

\textsuperscript{95} Much less research has been done beyond the gross statistical level regarding Latino rates of drowning. Latino, while always a slippery category, is particularly complicated because there is a separate set of demographic data for those who are, or whose parents are, foreign born. One exception is Berukoff and Hill’s (2010) study of attitudes towards swimming among Latino youth, which discusses fear of water in great depth.
when swimming? Or is it abnormal fear that could evolve into an anxiety disorder or phobia, which could then explain why these girls are not acquiring valuable swimming skills? (p. 570)

While fear of the water is a serious impediment to learning to swim, another common given reason is that Black girls don’t swim because they don’t want to get their hair wet, especially if it has been treated with chemical relaxers, as the chlorine in the water will affect already-weakened hair and cause it to discolor or break off. This is repeated sources as varied as newspapers (Zinser, 2006) academic reports (Irwin, et al., 2010; Norwood, 2010) and more casually in the popular press. One example appears in an Ebony magazine video segment, in which the new head of diversity for USA Swimming, Talia Mark, Manager of Multicultural Marketing for USA Swimming, offers that “research shows that this is the second of the three main reasons that Black girls don’t want to get in the water” (Neal, 2012). This is a troublesome bit of data: if this is, in fact, the case, then how can it be opposed in a meaningful way that doesn’t diminish the cultural hygiene practices of a particular group?

While many studies are concerned with why Black people don’t show up to swim, a number of authors have also considered these statistics, and started to ask what the broader social contexts are for keeping Black and Latino youth out of pools, not just their own personal constraints in participating. These authors argue that the larger social context must be examined, including the long history of racist policies around siting, building, and maintaining municipal swimming pools in Black and White neighborhoods, respectively (Wiltse, 2014), the market for lifeguards (Myers and Cuesta, 2012), the impact of having (or not having) Black athletic swimming role models.
Dawson (2006), in a rich history of Black people as swimmers in Africa and in the Americas, concludes his article with the idea that perhaps Black people do not swim after segregation because “because it came to be regarded as a ‘white’ activity” (p. 1355). Other scholars have filled in the lines of this hunch: as DeLuca (2013) notes, "While there are numerous studies on the subject of race and sport, most refer to minority groups and their experience of participation and representation or lack thereof. There are comparatively few ethnographic studies of Whiteness and its implications in specific sport settings" (p. 343). Based on a long-term ethnographic study of a private suburban swim club, she concludes that “the pool, as a cultural field, maintains socially segregated boundaries offering members a significant, yet hidden vehicle through which they can facilitate their class and race-based privilege” (p. 340). This work, which might be placed in the context of broader ethnographic study of middle class parenting anxieties (Vincent and Ball, 2007), is an interesting venue for beginning to think about what swimming lessons are for and whom they serve.

But all of this also raises a larger, and perhaps more interesting question: if basic swimming ability in and of itself does not necessarily correlate with not-drowning, then why are so many studies and resources focused on teaching Black children to swim? Or, put another way, what are they being taught? What sorts of bodies are being cultivated and whose bodies are being cultivated to do what? What would need to realistically happen in order to change this state of affairs? I turn now to the Swim For Life program in the New York City public schools to consider some of these questions.
Swim for life

Today, the Department of Parks, in cooperation with the Department of Education, offers the Swim for Life program, a 10-week basic swim program for second graders in New York City Public Schools. The program began in response to the perpetually high drowning rates of Black and Latino youth – nationally, two to three times the rate of their White counterparts. Second graders were chosen as the target age because their teachers are relatively less preoccupied with standardized testing (compared with older children), giving them time to swim; their ability to dress themselves for swim class; the still fairly even athletic ability between boys and girls; and the idea that girls don’t tend to have developed problems of body image as they might in later years. The program costs $100 per child which, to cover all 70,000 second graders in New York City, would cost $7 million per year. Currently funded in part by the Department Of Education, but mostly by donors, the program has not been able to secure long-term city funding, and so is still considered a pilot. Still, its short-term successes are notable: since 2011, twenty thousand second graders have received swim instruction, from more than 190 elementary schools across New York City.

In an interview with the head of the program, I asked what the greatest successes of the program has been, and he responded:

The ecstasy of kids in terms of their self-esteem, learning a specific skill that could save their life. They’re so ecstatic to be able to... they’re proud, they go back to school excited, ready to learn, and one class in Staten Island – it was so

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96 Swim for life was preceded, beginning in 2003, with the DOE’s smaller “Swim to Safety” program, which it absorbed. In a much earlier program, in 1966, the Board of Education adopted the national Red Cross program, “Operation Waterproof Fourth Grade,” sponsored by the Recreational Boating and Water Safety Committee of the National Safety Council under the US Department of Health, Education and Welfare, whose objective was “to teach 45,000 fourth grade youngsters to swim” during the school day (Daus, March 16, 1966). It is unclear when or why this program was discontinued.
prestigious that their class was learning how to swim at the YMCA, they wore goggles every time after. (Interview, July 3, 2013)

Physical confidence, it could be argued is part of the broad goal of health and wellness that swimming has long been meant to invoke. A child who has even rudimentary swimming ability, or one who is no longer afraid of the water, in the parlance of a program like this, has a life skill that makes them feel confident in the world, and makes them able to accomplish other tasks.

But one of the difficulties with Swim for Life is, after ten weeks, children are just enough better off than before in order to save themselves. On one hand, this is not a minor achievement if, in fact, it means fewer children will drown, and that they might feel happier and more confident. Yet the question arises once again: what does ‘knowing how to swim’ mean, both pragmatically and philosophically. From the interview:

N: How do you evaluate a program like this in real time? Is there a way to follow the children or to see?

P: We database every participant. We record at the first day of the ten lessons their skill level. And we track their progress over the 10 lessons. So we record their level of swimming. We have something called level 1 and level 2 based on the proficiency obtained. And about 80% of kids who participate obtain a level 1 skill level.

N: And what does level 1 mean?

P: Basically, rudimentary strokes. Being able to blow bubbles. Being able to... in essence if you fell in the water you’d be able to grab on to the side of the pool. Level 2 is being able to, basically, go unassisted in the water, without drowning

This interview data shows that Swim for Life is taking the necessary first steps to teach New York City’s second graders to swim, and getting children who are not comfortable with the water to become unafraid; this is no small feat.
Parents who do not know how to swim are often reluctant to send their children, and this program—while not requiring it—pushes parents who otherwise wouldn’t sign their children up for swim lessons:

**N:** So this kid takes swim for life, but if their parents don’t know how to swim ... how do you get parents on board to keep a child swimming?

**P:** Good question. The model of Swim for Life has the entire second grade class going as a group, so there’s peer pressure on the class to go. So for the parents who are reluctant to have their kid go, may not sign the consent form that is required. So usually what happens is that the excitement of the class going together, and kids hearing about the achievements of their classmates, puts pressure on the parents. At the summertime learn-to-swim program that Parks runs, the parent has to be willing to have the kid go learn to swim. Whereas the Swim for Life program model uses peer pressure on the second grader. So that’s how we overcome that barrier.

On one hand, this attitude can seem quite paternalistic. On the other, the program also sees itself as removing barriers for children’s participation in the case of reluctant and fearful parents.

**P:** Basically, what we were trying to get at with everybody, and especially the parents who themselves were reluctant. So the voluntary program doesn’t really ... hasn’t shown to me the ability to get a child whose parent is scared themselves into the water. This program does that.

**N:** And you find that’s a big obstacle. That a parent will be afraid.

**P:** Yes, yes yes... I’ve had many parents who come to the first lesson cause they’re petrified themselves. They want to see what’s going on in the pool. And only after they see that the instructors are competent, that they feel comfortable.

**N:** How often does that happen?

**P:** I’d say... in an average class there’s always one, two, three or four kids whose parents check. And what happens? The parents, especially in needy areas, say to the kids *we don’t have enough money for a bathing suit. We can’t afford it.* So the kid says ‘oh – that’s too bad’ and then they come back and say *everybody’s having fun!* But we’ve received donated bathing suits, so, as a way to remove
that obstacle. That’s an easy thing for a scared parent to do – and we circumvent that.

However, once Swim for Life instruction ends, the children who want to keep swimming or swim more may or may not have a chance. While students are offered a free membership at a New York City Parks pool, or a $10/year membership to a YMCA or a Boy’s Club/Girl’s Club pool at the end of the program, swimming requires not only the support of a parent (or other family member) to take them to and from lessons, but also a certain degree of social comfort with the customs, attitudes and values related to water safety and swimming (Ito, 2008).

The program’s organizers can hardly be faulted; they have enough trouble as it is just raising the $100 per child in order to ‘drown-proof’ them. A question remains, however, as what sort of swimming body has been cultivated, and what the threshold might be between a “Level 1” and young people that might really enjoy and interact with the water on a regular basis, or participate in the sport of swimming.

In Rose’s (2001) discussion of the changes in biopolitical techniques, he outlines the transition between kinds of control (see Chapter One). The Swim for Life program is inflected with the transition from bio-governance of populations (all second graders) to individuals (a child who is fearful or whose parents are fearful of water) to the ‘new’ ethopolitics:

**P:** What we don’t have, but would love to have, is [Body Mass Index] statistics. Because we have received money from the Robert Wood Johnson foundation. And that’s financed programs in Brownsville, where the obesity … childhood obesity is a huge problem. But I can’t document the BMI of a kid who’s going through Swim for Life.

**N:** Also, is a kid going to significantly get more exercise inside of ten swimming lessons? Are you going to see a change over … it seems pretty short, yeah?

**P:** Yes, however it is well-documented that kids who are physically active tend to be less obese and they study better in school.
Measuring BMI in order to intervene in national rates of childhood obesity is a new logic for swim lessons, as well as a return to the notion of a ‘national’ health.

Conclusion

Through swimming lessons bodies learn more than just to swim: bodies become unafraid, bodies become able to participate in an environment but also a cultural set, children become more likely to survive – but not all children and not entirely more likely, and bodies become imbued in a matrix of state infrastructure. When is giving swim lessons ‘worth it’?

While ending drowning is a central reason, this chapter demonstrates that it is not the only one, as funding for mass swimming lessons on the part of the state have gone in and out of style, and take a different tone for different populations.

Swimming lessons, as shown here, often target the health of a particular population to a particular end, under a familiar guise of a public that includes ‘everyone.’ Sometimes the concern is the well-being of poor people or, as in the case of the river baths, expanding this measure to include the poor in an elite activity in order to help them do it properly. Sometimes the concern is for the national health, as we see in the ads for New York City swim lessons in the 1940s. And in the case of Swim for Life, while the goal is to expand the program to all children, the site of immediate concern is the population of Black and Latino children. For each group, the term “knowing how to swim,” especially from the perspective of those providing the lessons, has different meanings in both senses of the word: what counts as ‘skill’ is different in each case, as is the norm or ideal that swimming is meant to convey.
Not everyone who participates in a municipal bathing place today must know how to swim. Indeed, the WPA pools and many other outdoor pools in New York City were built to a depth of only four feet, so that an unskilled adult might be able to participate. Yet the ability to swim establishes a separate caste of ‘qualified participants’ in the corporeal public spaces of the pool, demonstrating collusion between the functions of teaching and of regulating.
Chapter Five: Sex, Health and Danger

McCarren pool—one of the original 1936 WPA pools—was remodeled in 2012. In an adaptation of the original rectangular form, the pool is now shaped like a huge squared “C,” where activities are divided into sections. In one leg of the C, occupied mostly by parents and small children, the cement gently slopes down into the water like an urban beach, with fountains shooting into the water, where toddlers delight in the spray. The other leg is used for lap swimming, formal or informal, depending on the time of day. And the middle section, over 300 feet in length, is a giant play field of water races, cooling dips, and a sea of teenagers chatting, splashing and flirting. On the far side of the wide cement pool deck, where people lounge all around, talking or reading or dozing, short bleachers built into the outer wall of the pool complex overlook the middle section; while originally designed for spectators of water performances and races, today sunbathers fill the wide steps.

Families and groups of friends have staked out space on the deck and on the bleachers—they spread out towels on this bit of cement, or leave a hat to claim one of the few white plastic lounge chairs. In the water, groups hang loosely around a section of the wall, or sometimes form a circle facing inward, turning their backs to separate their cluster from others. Like in any of the many busy spaces in New York, people have claimed their spots as best they can so that the next group can come close but not touch: this provides a kind of ‘halo’ of safety which, in a setting full of bodies in in one pieces, bikinis, and tight-fitting shorts, includes sexual safety.

Unlike pools in other parts of town—such as K-Pool in Bedford-Stuyvesant, where the patrons are almost exclusively African-American—McCarren pool appears diverse. People of
many racial and ethnic groups, and many ages, are in and around the water together, likely owing to the geographical border between neighborhoods and transit lines where this pool sits: the G train runs a long north-south axis from Brooklyn to Queens, and the L reaches east and West, from Bushwick to the Hudson river. This is also the only pool I have visited where lesbian couples are openly affectionate and flirtatious in the water (though I have not seen the same behavior among gay men.) It is a portrait of the kind of public space that some theorists might imagine as a place for ‘working through difference’ (See Chapter One, including Shepard and Smithsimon, 2011; Carr, et al., 1992).

In a cluster in the water, squarely in the belly of the big “C,” young men and women, mostly Latino, are talking and flirting— they chat and dive and chase and lift each other up and carry each other around in cradling arms. They are one of the many groups behaving this way—playful, with an edge of teenage conspiracy to them. In the midst of this play, a voice crackles over the loudspeaker, and makes an announcement about safety: “no horseplay permitted.” As soon as the announcement ends, one of the teenage boys near me starts yelling “NO FOREPLAY?” He is playing on ‘horseplay.’ “MAN – THEY SAID NO FOREPLAY!” He is shouting now, to anyone within earshot. “ISN’T THAT WHAT THE POOL IS FOR??”

For regular pool-goers, it can be easy to forget that the pool is a deeply sexualized environment, a place where every body is on display – through costume, but also through behaviors of touch, play and gaze. Or, on the contrary, there is no forgetting about sex at the pool at all. We go to the pool knowing our bodies will be fully on display, just this side of naked: the cues about sex, about private parts and public bodies have to do with differences of inches in stretchy material. Indeed, norms and anxiety around sex—costumes, mores and ideas about
'appropriate’ sex and gender behavior—have not ever been separate from the municipal bathing project, and the wider culture of social bathing. The public pool, municipal or otherwise, compels us to participate in public life in a state of undress that is revealing and, perhaps in this way, equalizing. We are all bodies at the pool. Still, even in this state, not all bodies are treated equally – by other pool goers, by lifeguards, by law enforcement. And not every pool gleans the same kind of attention: violence, sexual and otherwise, is treated differently—by the city, by police and in the media—across different neighborhoods, as is demonstrated at the end of this chapter.

While the summer outdoor pool is not formally marked as a place to practice sexual play, that is a central activity, particularly among adolescents. Although pools have long been used as a site to corral teenagers and their ‘disruptive’ behaviors, sexualized play is tolerated at the pool in many forms. A typical game that I witnessed repeatedly at K-Pool involves a group of teenage boys chasing down a girl in the water (with very few exceptions to these gender roles), grabbing them from behind, and throwing them back into the water sideways. The girl often laughs and screams, feigning an escape from the boys—who are likely a good deal stronger—perhaps assisted by her friends, who are caught up in the same game. They taunt and shout and chase, in what I began to refer to as ‘a tangle of teenagers’. Yet the mostly-unspoken boundaries of this sort of play separate appropriate (teenage, but also adult) exuberance from danger.

Anxieties of gender and sexuality surround public space in its sociological conception as places of stranger sociality. Although the contemporary state maintains an official indifference to sexual play at public pools (unless it turns violent), the highly sexualized nature of these
spaces appears both through everyday norms about gender and sex, and occasionally through open conflicts. But through its program of regulation of sex and sexuality, the municipal bathing project today tends to contain rather than condemn sexual play. The state-mandated costume requirements of the pool—revealing, form fitting, on display across gender—cause sex to be treated as part of the scenery, if closely guarded. Thus we arrive at the pool as a site of unsexed sexuality, officially sanctioned but unrequired sexiness.

Many examples throughout the history of social bathing (some municipal, and some private although related) in the United States and abroad illustrate the paradox of designating the bath or pool as a site for public sex behaviors that do not belong in other places. One of the early functions of public baths in American cities in the 19th century was to both cordon off the sight of the naked bodies of working class men and boys who swam in the rivers, but men continued to swim naked, together, in state-sanctioned spaces for decades. Bathers in London in the 1920s could pay extra to swim in mixed gender times at public pools, while they were free at other times (Smith, 2005). Early YMCAs got rid of the steam room in favor of a ‘steam box’ in which men could sit with only their heads poking out, as steam poured in the sides, in order to maintain the designation of bodies as private in a space of sociality (Lupkin, 2010). Today’s swimming pools in the Netherlands have weekly ‘gay swim,’ implying that the rest of the time is ‘straight swim’ and making clear that all social bathing is sexualized. The list goes on. An historical vantage, once again, places the anxieties and transgressions of gender and sexuality, and the regulation of these, in a longer trajectory in and through infrastructural choices.
The co-construction of users and space at the pool or bathhouse extends to what it means to ‘be sexual’ in public. Bell, Binnie, Cream, & Valentine (1994) note a wide literature that demonstrates how

Sexual identity impacts on the use and reading of space, and that the socially and culturally encoded character of space has bearing on the assuming and acting out of sexual identities... Here we have to think about what 'being gay' and 'being straight' means. Does it mean adopting a life-style, putting on an identity, which marks the bearer as sexual? (p. 32)

The question that is asked here is answered in a variety of ways through user participation in the municipal bathing project. At the pool and the bath, while the ‘official’ possibilities have always certainly been circumscribed, a multiplicity of sexual identities is acted out, under various systems of coding.97

In this chapter, I first sketch how the development of swimwear, has shaped and been shaped by the sexual life of social bathing spaces since the 19th century. Next, I review literature regarding of the ways that sex and sexuality is played out in public spaces, with a focus on heteronormativity. The third section examines the locker-room as a site of contests over health, and sexual and gender identities. Finally, I tell the story of a series of sexual crimes that took place in various pools around New York City in the mid-1990s, and the ways that the pool was portrayed as an exceptional site of sexual danger in public space. These pieces serve to explain how regulation of the interaction of bodies is one way that social regulation occurs in the municipal bathing project. We learn from Foucault (1990) that sex is a potent site of control

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97 As Newton (1993) noted, "Rarely is the erotic subjectivity or experience of the anthropologist discussed in public venues or written about for publication" (4). While what Newton describes is not true of all ethnography (and not of many ethnographic studies of explicitly queer places, and especially bathhouses), ethnographic writing is a site in which the [straight] researcher is more or less expected to keep it to herself. But how could we? At the pool, we are all participating in the “erotics of the street” (Bell, 2001, p. 91). Bodies are on display, including our own, and we are, at least, partially, there for the show (Whyte, 1980).
over both bodies and populations – thus, understanding the disputes that arise in the spaces of municipal bathing can contribute to understanding this mode of regulation in and through public spaces.

Gender, space and the history of swimming attire

In the history of social bathing in the 19th and 20th century, styles and norms of gender and sexual presentation varied widely according to class. Dynamic shifts in attitude toward mixed gender bathing that gained popularity in private establishments often filtered into the municipal bathing sites later. Bathing suit fashions reflected these changes, especially with regard to ‘propriety’ for women: the rise of middle and upper class beach resort culture in the mid-19th century influenced popular swimming costume for women, as mixed gender bathing became more common along the Atlantic coast (Bier, 2011).98

As Warner (2006) notes in her history of American women’s sportswear, “until that time, men frequently bathed or swam nude, while women covered themselves in long, loose and flowing dresses of a canvas-like material” (p. 62). As swimming took on an athletic connotation, and women began to participate in sport, early women’s swim pioneers such as Kate Bennett insisted that swimming costumes make it possible for women to participate

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98 One casualty of mixed-gender bathing was the decline in favor of the women-only therapeutic bath and spa culture. Cayleff (1987) notes, “Given the increasing societal emphasis on heterosociality, an environment that fostered intimate emotional and even sensual relationships between women would be likely to fall into disuse. This shift away from societally approved same-sex intimacy, therefore, reflected a changing cultural perception of male and female natures, one that made men and women less ‘social opposites’ and more ‘ideal companions.’... From 1870 to 1920, then, this separate female sphere became increasingly devalued for the supposed threat it posed to relations between the sexes” (p. 161).
 Nonetheless, the fashion for heavy cloaks continued in some quarters for another fifty years in sites of mixed gender swimming. In her 1918 book, *How to Swim*, Annette Kellerman, an athlete and advocate for popular swimming objected to these suits: "There is no more reason why you should wear those awful water overcoats... than there is that you should wear lead chains... Any one who persuades you to wear the heavy skirtly kind is endangering your life" (Kellerman, 1918, p. 47). Like in the persistence of many kinds of structures for bathing alongside one another, social norms for different styles of bathing costumes endured together, and gender-separate periods continued together with mixed gender swimming.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, one motivation for reformers to advocate for enclosed baths (river baths as well as bathhouses) was to get naked boys and men out of the sights of ‘respectable’ middle and upper class women – and this was a fight that went on for some time.

The display of nudity was one element through which “urban lakes and rivers were marked as male public spaces during the nineteenth century” (Wiltse, 2007, p. 14), and stood in opposition to urban public spaces that were established and closely surveilled by the state. However, even as rivers and other outdoor bathing places were enclosed for stricter governance through restrictions on time and space for bathing, men continued to swim naked for many decades in public pools and baths, as did some women.

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99 Bennett would open a swim school in Manhattan and, “at some point during the 1870s... was hired as a pool attendant and swimming teacher for the city baths as well as at her private school” (Bier, 2010, p. 25).
Outside of athletics, two big changes affected the kinds of women’s swimwear that became available in the early decades of the twentieth century: one was the rise of the fashion for tanned—white—skin, and the other was, as Warner (2006) describes:

A new awareness of leisure time, the much wider availability of motor cars after the introduction of Henry Ford’s model T in 1908, easier access to beaches, the growth of Florida as a resort destination, the California boom in general and Hollywood movies in particular, and the daring increase in individual freedom after World War I all worked together to encourage people to uncover in the warmth of the postwar sunshine. Thus, clothing for resort wear, so closely related to swimwear, bared the skin for the first time outside of a competitive sport venue. (p. 80)

As leisure grew with the rise of beach culture, coinciding with the development of new quick-dry style textiles, so did the fashion swimsuit for women – a suit that covered her breasts, pubic

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100 In the above engraving, it is difficult to discern what the women are or are not wearing among a number of kinds of costumes, but this also might have to do with the publication where this image was meant to be placed for consumption.

101 A number of authors cite the rise of the aesthetic of tan skin for the more skin-baring style of swim suit (Smith, 2005; Warner, 2006), but none deal in the ways that this “fashion” was only great among white women.
area, and buttocks to varying degrees (Johns, 1997; Schmidt, 2008).

Men continued to swim naked in many venues (including in some public schools in New York City). In this image from a 1928 manual on swimming pool sanitation (Wallace and Tiernan, Co., 1928), young men stand and sit around the edges of the pool, without any clothes. Though the illustrator renders them somewhat modestly – leaving their genitalia out of the drawing – nude swimming was standard for boys in single-sex swimming up through the 1950s.

![Swim filter and pump diagram](image)

**Fig 5.2: Naked boys shown in a Swim filter and pump diagram**
Source: Wallace and Tiernan, 1928: *the Sanitation of Swimming Pools*

When pools came indoors it was considered cleaner to have boys go naked because early swimsuits were made of wool, the fibers of which could clog up the filtration systems. (This does raise the question, however, of what women were meant to do, as their suits were
also made of wool and I have found no account of them being required to swim naked.

Anecdotally, in the course of research, a friend's father, or an interviewee will mention this fact off hand in a hush, as if it were an embarrassing secret even though this behavior went on completely publicly, in schools and in municipal pools for many years (Markowitz, 2014).

In Kisseloff’s (1989) oral history of Manhattan in the early 20th century, one resident recounts from his youth:

When I was younger we swam naked. But if you began to get a little manly and had hair follicles around your privates, you were not permitted to swim naked. There was a candy store at the corner of 28th and Ninth where you could rent a little loincloth, a small towel, and a small piece of soap for two cents. After you did your swimming, you'd come back with the loincloth and towel, and they would repay you a penny. Now two cents in those days was a fortune. Maybe some of the kids could get one penny. So the enterprising storekeeper would say, 'Okay, I'll take the penny, but you have to leave one shoe as a deposit.' So you'd leave the shoe and go along with your loincloth, and you'd hop, hop along to the pool. You'd always have one dirty foot. (pp. 500 - 502)

Today, most Americans cannot imagine swimming for sport without some sort of bathing suit to conceal and bind our ‘private parts,’ as mixed gender swimming is the norm. However, this required a process of social learning, with different ideals than those surrounding gender segregated swimming that was, for so many years, practiced (at least by men) in the nude.102

In Martin and Koda’s (1990) history of western swimwear, the authors show a change over the 20th century in women’s bathing attire:

Women's arms were liberated in the teens; legs were progressively exposed in the 1920s; some décolletage appeared in the 1930s; fiber and fabrics allowed the body beneath to come out in the 1930s and 1940s; two-piece suits and maillots with apertures bared midriff and sides in the 1940s and 1950s; the navel was exposed in the late 1960s and 1970s; high cuts revealed hips in the 1970s

102 Indeed, in the Netherlands, many swimming pools still sponsor a weekly hour of ‘naturzwimmen’ or nude bathing, patronized mostly by older men, but open to all (mixed gender.)
and radical gestures even revealed breasts and buttocks. Anatomy was not destiny, but a map of social desire. (p. 43)

In this telling, the exposure of the female body is part of what it meant (and means) to be ‘modern’ over time. While this idea should not be taken as an injunction against the exposure of women’s bodies in order to save them from objectification, but is a way of understanding one process through which social ideas get played out on the surfaces of bodies.

**Sex and heteronormativity**

The municipal bathing project has produced sites of public life that are not only sexual, but also both implicitly and explicitly heteronormative, places that are based in binary notions of gender, and express “a constellation of practices that everywhere disperses heterosexual privilege as a tacit but central organizing index of social membership” (Berlant and Warner, 1998, p. 555). This system not only betrays a cultural prejudice, but a technique of governmentality extending from nation-state to family. Even with gender-separate swimming now uncommon in North American cities, the tacit, everyday rules of heterosexual cis-gender normativity operate on a continuous loop at the contemporary municipal pool. Foremost, we are expected to enter into the gender-appropriate locker room, through which, Fusco (2002)—employing Butler’s ideas of performativity—explains, the “materiality of 'sex' is forcibly produced and repeated in, and through, the entrance signs. These signs might be thought of as citations that, through a process of reiteration, enable and constitute the subjects of 'sex’”(p. 103)

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103 Some municipal pools have re-introduced women’s swimming hours for religiously observant people, including Orthodox Jews at the Metropolitan Recreation Center in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. In other cities, this has been the source. Conflicts have arisen in some North American cities such as Portland, Oregon (Slovic, 2008) over whether members of the Muslim community can request gender-separate swimming times for the women of their communities. These gender specific periods also have occasionally attracted non-religious women who would rather not display their bodies in mixed gender settings because of their weight, scars, or disabilities.
In addition to the signs dividing people into two genders on the locker room doors, there also looms the ever-present danger of anti-queer violence and other kinds of ‘unofficial’ enforcement for people who stray from unspoken gender and sexual norms.

Much literature on sexuality in public space has to do with gay men cruising for sex, illustrating Chauncey’s (1994) now-famous phrasing, ‘privacy could only be had in public.’ A number of other authors have gestured at the complex of enforcement in and around public spaces that invoke morality (Catungal and McCann, 2010), citizenship (Berlant and Warner, 1998; Bell and Binnie, 2000) and the ways that sexual identities rely on networks of meaningful spaces and their codes of access, which Bell (2001) calls the “public-private, liberation-regulation paradox” (p. 90).

In “The History of Gay Bathhouses,” Bérubé (2003) describes how “Bathhouses evolved into gay institutions not by themselves, but in the context of the slowly developing sexual landscape in the nation’s cities” (p. 36). He goes on to outline a taxonomy of Ordinary Bathhouses, Favorite Spots, Early Gay Bathhouses and Modern Gay Bathhouses. While the three types developed reputations as reliable places for cruising and sex, at Ordinary Bathhouses, or municipal baths, sex was unusual. Chauncey (1994) concurs that the municipal baths were both engineered for little privacy and highly surveilled by attendants, so that “Men who met in the public baths could make appointments to meet again elsewhere and sometimes managed to have sex at the bath itself. But such baths offered only limited spaces for sexual encounters and discouraged lengthy stays... and thus remained unattractive to men seeking

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104 At McCarren Pool (and possibly others) the introduction of a ‘family’ locker room provides an opportunity for gender non-conforming people, as well as those who desire a bit more privacy, to change costume without being closely observed. The line, however, is often long, and most people change clothes in a large open room with benches in the middle and lockers around all sides.
sexual partners" (pp. 208 - 9).\textsuperscript{105} It wasn’t until the 1950s and 60s that we see the first Modern Gay Bathhouses, “meant to be exclusively gay and catered to the sexual and social needs of gay men” (Berube, 2003, p. 36).

So while the early municipal baths had some small place in the history of gay baths, it seems that they were never a central site of sex and cruising due to their high level of surveillance. But this also raises the question of why they were so un-private and surveilled in the first place – this was likely a decision on the part of the architects (or their employers) to keep this activity from happening. In a 1939 history of baths and bathing, the taboo on the homosexual culture of social bathing is very strong, the author advising that "The danger of homosexualism has always been and always will be inseparable from the Turkish bath" and, further, “it is important to note that the sexual aspect of bathing is almost wholly confined to those who patronize public baths for social or hedonistic purposes” (Scott, 1939, p. 255). That is to say, a strong impetus to remove the social aspect almost entirely from the early municipal bathhouse was as a bulwark against sexual interaction, to reinforce sexual heteronormativity even in homosocial spaces.

In recent years, literature on gay social and sexual life in public space has expanded to lesbians and trans people. A number of scholars have written about the Gay women’s bathhouses in Toronto, especially the “Pussy Palace” night, which is held at a gay bathhouse every number of months. These scholars consider social lesbian sexual expression in terms of hegemonic notions of care (Cooper, 2007) and feminine norms around promiscuity (Bain and

\textsuperscript{105} Chisholm (1999) critiques both Berube and Chauncey (and some others) for offering a “historiography of the gay bathhouse [which] presents its object 'casually', without challenging the epic of capitalist progress. Objectivity is betrayed by 'empathy' or nostalgic evocation of bathhouse phantasmagoria and dwelling upon the phenomenology of cruising” (p. 259).
Nash, 2006; Cooper, 2009; Hammers, 2008; Nash, 2007). Albert (2011) also asserts that Gay women do in fact have sex in public places, but much more often in the context of relationships, rather than the ‘cruising’ culture of gay men. While plenty of flirtation happens in the water at all pools, it was only at McCarren pool in Williamsburg where I saw openly lesbian flirtatious play, with both white women and women of color cradling and kissing one another in the water. It is a rare space that affords lesbians, bisexuals, and queer women of different races the possibility to interact side by side (Gieseking 2013), particularly in a setting marked as straight.

Yet Hubbard (2008) asks us to keep in mind, "geographies of sexuality overwhelmingly focus on the way that spaces are produced as either heterosexual or homosexual, and consequently fail to acknowledge the diverse sexualities that may exist within these broad categories.... It is hence vital that geographers acknowledge the existence of many different 'heterosexual' practices and spaces" (p. 3). The pool necessarily includes a spectrum of heterosexual, homosexual, heterosocial and homosocial behaviors, even if some are more outwardly permitted than others. Perhaps the contemporary pool as a sexualized space requires a lens of queer geography (Oswin, 2008), with the understanding that "... a queer geography that interrogates the multifaceted uses of all sexualities must focus on the workings of heteronormativities (and homonormativities) rather than heterosexuality" (p. 98). Contests over enforcement that buttresses these processes through which sex and gender are made material emerge in social bathing rituals that begin in the locker room, which operates as a threshold between the outside world and the special world of the pool, and demonstrate how the gradients of power over sex and sexuality operate.
Lockers and locker rooms

*It is not possible completely to understand the importance and symbolic value attached to the threshold in the system, unless one is aware that it owes its function as a magic frontier to the fact that it is the place of a logical inversion and that, as the obligatory place of passage and of meeting between the two spaces, which are defined in relation to socially qualified movements of the body and crossings from one place to another, it is logically the place where the world is reversed.* (Bourdieu, The Berber House, 1968)

The act of entering the pool is governed by a series of ritual thresholds that transform those who use it into proper participants in the space. Entering into the correctly gendered locker room, as mentioned, is the first. By passing through these, the body is made into a swimmer, through claiming a locker, undressing and dressing (including varying degrees of nudity), and the shower that completes the ritual. As Bourdieu suggests, there is an element of magic involved here: dousing oneself with the magical ‘cleansing’ shower water, the substance of the bathing world reinvents the person as a qualified amphibian, ready to participate in the aqueous realm.

This transformation, however, is true in all locker rooms so what makes the municipal locker room special or unusual, or a worthy object of study? If in the municipal bathing project as a whole, the state both governs and produces a social life through bodies in the water, the near-naked body is expected to behave through sex and gender norms that denote, at different times, hygiene, desirability, and propriety through corporeal public space of municipal bathing. Passage through the locker room produces some of the qualitative character of this social life.
Healthification and showering

Fusco (2006) describes the locker room as a semi-public realm of ‘healthification’ in which social ideas about wellness and hygiene are imposed on the bodies of attendees, in which we, at least ritually, rid ourselves of dirt and hair and mucous—our private bodies and their impurities—so that we may more purely enter into the shared public space of bodies.

Showering is a common part of the ritual move from civilian to bather. Before the rise of effective disinfectants (such as chlorine), this step was meant to disinfect the body before sharing a giant tank of water with hundreds of other bodies. Like in earlier regimens of cleansing, social and anti-microbial motivations are difficult to distinguish: through the 1930s “gym instructors encouraged the use of the shower as part of training and for hygiene, the importance of which was also evident in the meticulous washing and sterilizing of bathing suits in park laundries and in the care taken to see that each bather took a thorough bath before entering the pool” (Cranz, 1982, p. 70). At the WPA pools, for many years, bathers were required to step through footbaths of bleach water as a bulwark against the spread of fungal infections and skin-borne illness (Gutman, 2007).

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106 In early locker rooms, and up through the 1960s, patrons were often issued bathing suits by the Parks department, which had been cleaned through their own sterilizing laundry service. Later, when people brought their own suits, clothes were deposited in a wire basket and patrons were given a numbered metal tag, which they could return at the end of the day in order to get their clothes back. In a New School report on recreation in cities, from 1969, one of the changes that will give pools more of a ‘resort feel’ is the provision of “self-service lockers in an attractive and colorfully decorated locker room cut down on delay, save costs, and add to the sense of pleasure” (Guggenheimer, 1969, p. 124).

107 Cleansing and public health, while deprioritized, still operated in the background of the new WPA pools. Infectious diseases were a primary concern (including Polio.) A 1940 memo to Parks Borough Directors from Chief Engineer Latham insisted that “the regulations of the Department of Health call for an examination of the patrons and the exclusion from the pools of such people found with sores, skin diseases, etc. Instructions must be issued immediately to the Supervisors that they are to pay more attention to this examination of the patrons of the pools” (Latham, July 16, 1940). (This is however, contradictory, when held up against a 1945 memo that claims “the use of soap was discontinued in pools several years ago but every patron is required to take a shower before entering the pool (Latham, July 5, 1945).
Today, in the locker room of the outdoor pools (always) as well as the indoor pools (sometimes), a Parks or NYPD police officer sits or stands, surveilling the space, enforcing rules, occasionally assisting patrons with stuck lockers, and making sure that fights don’t break out. An attendant usually sits at the shower as well, asking patrons to shake out their towels to assure they do not bring anything that is prohibited onto the pool deck. I assume these jobs are poorly compensated, or simply boring. The attendants in many of the pools seem to pay little attention, or look at their phones a lot – a patron who doesn’t feel like showering easily bypasses them. If they are watching, this action has become little more than ritual: a demonstration to enforcers who really do not care. In one case, I note of myself:

*I get in the shower, not because I think it will get me clean before I swim, but because I don’t want to be yelled at by anyone working there. It is warm enough, even if the nozzle is only at shoulder height, causing me to have to crouch down a bit. I get under the fine spray just enough to make my hair and bathing suit appear wet, wiping my wet hands on the parts of my suit that still appear dry.*

On the way out of the shower, yet another attendant assures that patrons have showered, and are only bringing in the permitted materials (towel, goggles, no newspapers or magazines.)

Although the shower before and after bathing is not explicitly sexualized, particularly in outdoor pools where the exposed showers are only meant for rinsing, and it is not possible to take a fully naked soap shower, the cleansing aspect of the ritual is so tied up in a gendered space that to not mention it is to leave out a prominent detail. Perhaps it is one among many bathing rituals that does not need to be explicit to be sexualized. Additionally, the shower is a vestige of enforcement of hygiene that, while no longer so central to the social imaginary of the municipal bathing project, has never entirely been disentangled.
Costume

Thinking about the sexed, sexy, and naked body raises an obvious but interesting point, that is, that most of the time people are actually not naked. Most of us live our lives not as naked bodies but as 'clothed bodies'... Clothes perform an important material function by protecting bodies and keeping them warm but they also perform an important signification function (Johnston and Longhurst, 2010, p. 33).

Costume is another part of the ritual transformation. In order to not be noticed as an explicitly sexual object at the pool, there is the option of sports gear: racing suits for men or women, goggles, swim caps. These imply that the swimmer intends to use the pool for reasons of health, potentially making the body—particularly in the case of women—a site of reduced gaze. As I note in my discussion of method, sometimes my skin was enough to cause pool attendants to assume I was there for sport, especially at the pool in Bedford-Stuyvesant, as most white women (without children) tended to be.

Another arena for contests over sexual expression at the pool, as well as the production of sexualized bodies, is in the choice of costumes that are considered ‘appropriate’ for bathing. The New York City Parks Department pools do require ‘appropriate’ bathing costume, for both men and women, as follows:

* Bathing suits must be worn on the deck and in the water. Men’s bathing suits must have mesh linings. Hats may be worn on the deck for sun protection but are not allowed in the water. Plain white T-shirts may be worn over bathing suits if desired. Sneakers are not permitted. Rubber flip-flops or water shoes are permitted.*

This raises some basic questions: is a men’s bathing suit a pair of trunks, or a bathing suit worn by a man? While the gendered aspect of these cannot be enforced by law (i.e. a man could not legally be stopped for choosing to wear a woman’s bikini on deck), it
can be enforced by an overzealous Parks Enforcement or Police officer, or by threats from other patrons.

The reasoning behind these rules—as with the earlier concern over fibers from wool swimsuits clogging the filters—is partly sanitary. But the rules have holes in them; as well, they are not evenly enforced, neither across nor within pools. The given logic is that bathing suits will primarily be worn in the water, and not other places, so they are ‘cleaner’ than street clothes; also, their fibers will not separate, and clog up the filters at the pool. But, because of this rule, many children at the pool simply wear their bathing suits all day. They walk up to the pool in swimsuits that have food and other dirt on them, and sit on subways and benches in them. Aqua socks are allowed, even if the patron wore them on the street prior to entering the pool, undoing the logic yet again. Yet this system of distinguishing what clothes do and do not belong at the pool, as Douglas points out in *Purity and Danger*, (2002 (1966)), like any system of ‘purity,’ in fact, relies on imaginaries of exclusion and contamination that do not necessarily hold up well under scrutiny.

T-shirts are allowed, but only white ones – ostensibly for reasons of concern over gang colors introduced in the 1990s. Yet while street clothes are forbidden because they have a lot of stray fibers hanging off of them, white t-shirts have the same problem. In addition, white t-shirts, when they get wet, are extremely revealing of the shapes that many people are trying to hide by wearing a t-shirt in the first place; indeed, the ‘wet t-shirt contest’ is a cultural meme for public sexual display. “Modest” bathing suits are now being manufactured, originating with Muslim women (Fitzpatrick, 2009) as are sun-blocking water costumes, like ‘rash guards’ and
UV-blocking shirts, but the expectation with most bathing suits is that they will reveal the contours of the wearer’s body or, in the case of men, his bare chest.

At the contemporary outdoor pool, especially, a sexual logic of costume is at work. And while these unspoken rules vary across cultural groups, the rules for appropriate bathing suit fashion can be confounding, and leave very little room for people who would choose to cover their bodies more, or who have a non-mainstream gender presentation.

**Boys in the women’s locker room**

One notable (if mostly unspoken) conflict in the locker room, is the age limit of the opposite-sex children who can be brought in.\(^{108}\) I observed mothers bringing their boys into the women’s locker room -- when I asked male friends, they said they never saw young girls in the men’s locker room. This is a distinction that cold perhaps be explained along ‘cultural’ lines in the grossest sense (i.e. the norms for different immigrant or ethnic groups), but probably has much more to do with necessity. Women, as the majority of caretakers for young children, are not able to leave small children to wait outside in a space full of strangers, or to let their small boys head into a room full of near-naked or naked men who, this system suggests, might cause them sexual harm.

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\(^{108}\) This is not a new conflict – in at least one letter to the Parks Department from Summer, 1939, a patron describes his wife’s four year old child being turned away from the women’s locker room, and implores Parks officials, “Will you please inform me whether this is a rule of your department, and if so, what is the age limit for a child to be able to go into the pool with his mother” (Lazar, July 14, 1939). Park Supervisor Victor Jenkins responds that a child that small “should accompany his mother into the female dressing room, as we would not like to have children of that age wandering about the bathhouse by themselves” (Jenkins, July 15, 1939). An actual rule, however, is not presented, and the age range has continued to seem flexible.
But of course, for some women and girls in every locker room, the presence of too-old boys is a sexual threat, as children tend not to hide their curiosity, to gaze and stare at bodies that are unlike their own. An uncomfortable episode that I witnessed follows:

As we approached the locker room, I saw women with young boys walking in. I remembered as a kid that this made me uncomfortable, and I wondered now how old was too old to let little boys in with their moms. Oddly, this is the one thing for which there is no rule or sign. Inside of the locker room, this conflict would be on full display. My friend and I set about getting dressed, trying not to drop our dry things in any puddles on the floors or benches.

A woman sat almost completely naked on a bench, save for a towel wrapped loosely at her waist. She was Black, probably in her late thirties, heavy set, with large breasts and rolls of belly exposed. (In contrast to the many other women who perform a locker room ‘dance’ for getting dressed without showing too much skin.) She was dressing two small children. Across from her, standing as if pinned to the wall, were two fully dressed white children, a boy and a girl probably age 8 and 10. The boy was definitely too old to be in there, and both of them stared intently at the older naked woman. At some point, the naked woman looked up from dressing her children and noticed the white children staring, and started screaming. “Get him away! He’s nasty! Get this nasty little motherfucker out of here!” over and over. The white children were mortified, and looked frozen, like they didn’t know what to do. The screaming woman was screaming at no one in particular, but kept it up for a good minute or so. Finally, the children’s mother (aunt?) showed up with two even smaller children, said something stern to them in a foreign language, and whisked them out. My impression was that they were from a Northern, or perhaps Eastern European country, where there was less concern about too-old boys being around naked women, or naked women at all.

While this example lays bare a conflict that can be read as racial, classed, and cross-cultural (local versus immigrant), this sort of dispute has constant undercurrents in the women’s locker-room. Regardless of various levels of comfort with other women’s too-old boys in the locker room, all women are, to some degree, expected to be understanding, to understand that other women must take care of children. All women, in this social context, are mothers. The children belong to their mothers – or the caretakers that function in this role, and all of the women in
the space are, by association, also mothers. If not now, then eventually. As ur-mothers, female bodies are not entirely private in the locker-room. And in their role of being-taken-care-of, those children are ostensibly desexualized, perhaps pre-sexual. Women are expected to undress in front of them, as they are in front of one another, because they do not ‘officially’ constitute a sexual threat to women’s bodies or privacy.

In the transformative threshold of the locker room, where individuals become qualified participants in municipal bathing environments, these three examples—the requisite shower, the rules of costume, and the constant negotiation over propriety with children—showcase the tensions in the pool, marked as a sexy un-sexed space, where justifications of health and safety often stand in for codes of sexual behavior. Because of these unresolved tensions, as well as rules that are unstated and variably enforced around gender and sexual propriety, the contemporary pool is ripe for conflicts over appropriate sexual behavior, and how to address sexual violence when it occurs.

Whirlpooling

A New York Times headline from July 7, 1993 reads, “A Menacing Ritual is Called Common in New York Pools.” The article describes a number of sexual assaults in New York City outdoor public swimming pools in which groups of young men surrounded young women in the water and, depending on the case, taunted them, tried to remove pieces of their bathing suits and, in the worst cases, assaulted them. The above article describes it as follows:

Groups of teen-age boys lock arms and shoulders and move in circles through the expanse of blue, churning the cool, chlorinated water, chanting rap lyrics and fondling girls at will. (Marriott, 1993)
These attacks, called ‘whirlpools,’ would continue to be reported in public swimming pools in New York City throughout the summers of 1993 – 1996, and would be attributed to a diverse set of causes, including “horseplay that got out of hand” (Marriott, 1993), pools that are “even more crowded than usual in the sweltering temperatures” (Tabor, 1993), “rap music” (McLarin, 1993), and “rape collaboration” (Vachss, 1993). Along with these group attacks, other cases of molestation and sexual assault in the city’s pools and locker rooms would become linked in media and politics as a singular phenomenon in which the public swimming pool was portrayed as an exceptionally dangerous place. Notably, none of the reporting on this series of events mentioned or put in context these attacks with the issue of group violence or sexual violence in the city as a whole. Further, the reactions to these crimes, from the mayor’s office especially, would become deeply racialized, though there would be no explicit mention of race in any of the news articles.

The series of sexual assaults in the mid to late 1990s in New York City public swimming pools garnered a lot of attention because they occurred in a patterned way that made them seem like a coherent phenomenon: many were large group attacks and in a regulated public space, where any number of lifeguards or bystanders could have stopped them. These elements run in contrast to the way that sexual assault is discursively constructed as a ‘private’ crime that happens between two people. Here, I would like to consider the ways in which the public swimming pool was constructed as a dangerous place through reporting this series of assaults. What about the space, in the rhetoric, made these crimes possible? What is the difference between the language used to describe this problem as one of sexual violence versus
one of public safety? How did different people in power frame this problem and how were those ideas portrayed in the media?109

According to Rubin (1984), "The most important and consequential kind of sex conflict is what Jeffrey Weeks has termed the 'moral panic.' Moral panics are the 'political moment' of sex, in which diffuse attitudes are channeled into political action and from there into social change" (p. 297). The case of ‘whirlpooling’ demonstrates this process in action, and how the discourse of political action around moral notions of the pool combined racist fears with notions of the (un)safety of public spaces. To call the media and political excitement around cases of patterned sexual assault a moral panic is not to dismiss the claims of the victims, nor the concerns of the public, as simply exaggerated. Thompson (1998) gives five points to understand what makes up a moral panic:

The first is that they take the form of campaigns (crusades), which are sustained over a period, however short or long. Second they appeal to people who are alarmed by an apparent fragmentation or breakdown of the social order, which leaves them at risk in some way. Third, that moral guidelines are unclear. Fourth,

109 Notes on sampling and method:
This section took as data articles that mentioned “whirlpooling” from the Lexis-Nexus database, Google, Google Scholar, and the New York Times archive. All media here come from mainstream English language print sources, archived online; sources for a larger study could include smaller papers, the “ethnic press,” organizing newsletters or flyers around this issue, or internal correspondence by city officials.

I would also note that I am not making a quantitative account here, though that could be done in a number of ways. A comparison of the rate of reporting on “whirlpooling” in 1993 (11 articles and Op-Eds) against rates of news reports on sexual abuse and assault in the same year, done over a number of years, could demonstrate how attention moved towards and away from this phenomenon. Another statistical choice is to survey police reports, and compare the crime rates to the rates of news reporting for the time period that the set of articles covers (July 7, 1993 – July 6, 1999). Police records of all sexual assaults reported in the set of all public spaces in New York City, or in all pools in New York City at that time would also describe any correlation or difference. That said, any of those analytic frameworks is a different project than understanding how the pool is located, rhetorically, as the site of this series of violent crimes.

As a qualitative study, the analytic possibilities of only newspaper sources are many. These include the frequency of kinds of reporting or the accompanying crime statistics; the language of reporting in the cases of assault including witness interviews; the language of official response; the language of reporting the official response; and public response to all of these in letters to the editor and other sources. What I include here is a preliminary grouping and examination of the kinds of language used to discuss this phenomenon (and the construction of it as a phenomenon) in the sources listed above.
that politicians and some parts of the media are eager to lead the campaign to have action taken that they claim would suppress the threat. Finally, the commentator judges that the moral campaign leaves the real causes of social breakdown unaddressed. (p. 3)

So, according to Thompson’s criteria, the ‘whirlpooling’ case is related to moral panic, but for the third point: the moral guidelines in this case are not unclear. Yet the crusading style on the part of media and politicians, the concern over the breakdown of the social order – and especially the blame placed on the emergent hip hop music of the era, and the reaction of the mayor’s office all take on the tone of a panic. Expanding from the above, I add that this crisis was a ‘spatial panic,’ in which a series of spaces—the outdoor pools—though diffuse in geography and unalike in events, were constructed as dangerous.

The story breaks each summer, 1993 - 1999

The July 7, 1993 article mentioned above is the first article that mentioned a “whirlpooling” attack, which had occurred on July 5 at the Crotona Pool in the South Bronx.

As the circle swarmed around a 14-year-old girl ... several boys ripped off her bathing suit top and one of them inserted his finger in her vagina. Through the usual complement of seven lifeguards and a lieutenant was one hand, they reacted late, swimmers said. The girl was rescued by her mother. (Marriott, 1993)

The same day the article was published, the police had two young men in custody, aged 14 and 17, who were arrested and charged with sexual abuse and assault.

In that same week, “young girls at two other New York City pools... reported being attacked” (Faison, 1993). The first was a group assault “with a 14-year-old girl telling the police yesterday that 5 to 10 boys removed the top to her bathing suit and fondled her” (Faison, 1993). The other, which was in fact quite different, involved a man in his 30’s who “lifted up
and fondled” two girls, 11 and 12 years old, in a different pool. From there, the number of reported group and individual assaults in pools continued throughout that week, and the entire month of July, 1993, totaling 17 victims and 33 arrests (McFadden, 1993). After that, the story did not appear again until the following summer.

In 1994, stories of sexual assault at pools were reported from July 5 – 13, and arrests were made “in 8 out of the 10 cases” (Editorial, 1994). The following year, 1995, a story came out in the New York Daily News in which the first line was “Police arrested seven boys yesterday in the first incident of sexual groping at a public pool this summer” (Margulis, 1995). At this point, the language suggests that the attacks were to be expected – this incident in which “a 12-year-old girl was ‘whirlpoled’ … surrounded and fondled by a gang of 12 and 13-year-old boys” (Margulis, 1995) was going to be the first of the summer. In fact, no more “whirlpooling” attacks were reported in the newspapers that year. One other group assault was reported in 1999 (Cauvin, 1999), and then none after that.

On the day following the first attack in 1993, Parks Commissioner Betsy Gotbaum claimed, “what … happened yesterday was that some ordinary horseplay got out of hand… As a result of that, we will be extremely vigilant” (Marriott, 1993); she then got the police commissioner to guarantee an increase in the number of officers patrolling the pools.110 But when another assault occurred a week later, on July 11, she stated, “This has been going on since time immemorial… And it’s not right. But in this incident, the lifeguards went to the

110 An article from the end of the season notes, “While Detective St. Just said the police had not increased their forces at the pools this summer, Ms. Gotbaum said vigilance to prevent incidents had been stepped up.” (McFadden, 1993, emphasis added) In fact, there would be no reported change in security at the pools until the next summer, when the “number of officers [was] increased to at least two and as many as six on patrol” (Wolff, 1994). Significant changes in security, including surveillance cameras would not arrive until 1996 (Herszenhorn, 1996, Swarns, 1996).
police and there were three arrests” (Tabor, 1993). Leave alone the idea that sexual assault is some essential part of play in public pools “since time immemorial,” the attacks did not stop, and so the mayor’s office decided to step in with a public relations campaign.

On July 12, Mayor Dinkins declared in a press conference, “We’ve got to find a way to let our young people know, our young males know, that it is unacceptable to disrespect our young women... We will not have it, we will not tolerate it” (McKinley, 1993). Because in the first assault (and others later on) young men were heard chanting, “Whoomp there it is,” the lyrics to a popular rap song of the time (Marriott, 1993, Tabor 1993), “Mayor Dinkins launched a campaign ... introducing buttons that read ‘Don’t Dis Your Sis’ and ‘Whirlpool Ain’t cool.’ He said he wants rap singers to work with the campaign” (Armstrong, 1993). A few days later, police precinct commissioners announced a meeting “with swimming pool administrators to discuss ways of stopping sexual assaults on young women” (“Meeting to Examine,” 1993).

The following summer, when the problem persisted, the (new) Parks Commissioner, Henry J. Stern, “said... that he was considering an experiment to segregate some pools, with separate areas for girls and boys or for adults and youngsters” (Martin, 1994) though this was never followed through. Meanwhile, now-Mayor Giuliani, “ordered stepped-up patrols of the pools by city police, and Mr. Stern .... deployed many of his parks enforcement officers there.” (Martin, 1994) But then the assaults, or the assaults reported as a set, continued. “... in only 11 days, 10 young women have been the victims of sexual assaults or assault attempts in New York City pools” (Editorial, 1994). In 1995 and 1999, although the papers reported more group attacks, there is no account of a statement by city officials in the periodicals surveyed here.
Examining the accounts of the series of events around whirlpooling, the attacks are ‘located’, through both official responses and news reports, in three social and physical contexts in order to explain why they occurred. A broad explanation offers that the attacks are a symptom of rape culture; until attacks such as these are understood as part of a systemic problem, they will persist because they will be thought of as isolated events and treated as such. Second, there are those who suggest that local cultural disintegration is at fault, for which they cite the language of rap music, the behavior of poor people in hot crowded public pools, and a culture of urban masculinity gone awry. These descriptions are loaded up with euphemisms and popular stereotypes about race and class. Third, the swimming pool itself is constructed as a unique site of social and sexual danger. The under-supervised crowd of nearly naked young people and the carnival like atmosphere is itself, a provocation. In each of these explanations, the ‘location’ of fault for the sexual crimes becomes the site of response, too. The latter two responses stoke the ‘spatial panic’ outlined above.

Locating the swimming pool itself as the locus of sexual violence comes, in part, from the playful name ‘whirlpooling,’ which suggests that rather than a criminal act, this is what happens when “the boys get out of control” (Armstrong, 1993) in the water. As a Montreal headline put it, “Whirlpooling – sounds harmless but it is the new name for sexual assault at the pool (Channing, 1993). Other articles name this variously as a “summer ritual” (Marriott, 1993) or “a craze known as The Whirlpool” (Burton, 1993), and locate the water as the space where this unique crime occurs. In these accounts, the busy character of the scene is largely to blame. “By all accounts, the pool was filled with people and it might have been difficult to tell the
difference between wild, raucous play and seriously threatening behavior” (Channing, 1993). Attacks sited in the water become divorced from the problems of sexual violence in other kinds of public places such as on the subway and in parks, as well as private places, where the majority of sexual assaults occur. And when framed in this way, the response too must focus on the pool, to let the public know that ‘something is being done’ to stop this problem. This includes installing extra police officers (or making them ‘more vigilant’), and training lifeguards to watch out for this sort of behavior.

In a 1994 article entitled “In Wake of Attacks, Swimmers Profess Pool Loyalty” (Marriott, 1994), the same reporter who wrote the first whirlpooling story attempted to salvage the reputation of public swimming pools in New York City, calling them “the People’s Health Club” and emphasizing that Hamilton Fish pool, previously a haven “for drug dealers and street toughs who defied the lifeguards and ignored the pool’s rules,” had undergone a $12 million dollar renovation and was a safe, clean place to play. Still, that piece ends with an account of an 11-year-old girl being grabbed at the pool. The other twenty-five articles surveyed here describe the pool as fairly dangerous. The summer season ended with a piece entitled “31 New York Pools Called Unsanitary” (1993) which linked unclean water to the bigger problems of the summer.

The ‘cultural disintegration’ model is best represented by Mayor Dinkins’ response. In this version, the pool is the site of danger in the context of declining values among young people, especially as expressed through rap music. Although his recruitment of rap stars, and ‘hip’ sloganeering might seem absurd in terms of actually solving any problems, they tells us a great deal about where he (and likely many others) located the source of this violence. That
the young men who perpetrated the crime in a few of the cases were chanting a line from a popular rap song of the moment gave even more weight to this line of thinking. Though many hip-hop songs have lyrics that glorify violence, and violence against women, so do other kinds of popular music and cultural media (See: Miedzian, 1993).

So while the mayor’s office attempted to quell the immediate situation, but also to recognize that this problem is “larger than pools” (McLarin, 1993), what resulted was an explanation based in euphemistic racialized discourse, and very little change in actual safety measures at the pools. The complex articulation of racial dynamics here with class and gender are emphasized, as an African-American mayor mobilized ‘hip’ and ‘urban’ language in order to get his point across.

The broadest explanation for the events, in which crimes of sexual violence are tied to larger social ills was the one given by some editorialists:

It’s misogyny that has boys stripping and molesting a helpless young swimmer, that has the dolts in California’s Spur Posse measuring their manhood in ‘scores,’ and that turned Tailhook ’91 into a gross bacchanal. And like racism, it can be learned in the home or on the streets. (Vachss, 1993)

This comment, authored by Alice Vachss, former chief of the Special Victims Bureau of the Queens District Attorney’s office, cites other widely publicized incidents of that year in which young men attacked and assaulted women either in groups, or as part of a group membership or identity.111 These events, according to Vachss, are part of a discourse that distinguishes

111 The Spur Posse was a group of high school men who coerced women into having sex with them in order to gain ‘points’ in their secret high school club, and who many defended as ‘boys being boys’ while others denounced them as rapists. Tailhook was a private club associated with the US Navy, whose 1991 gathering in Las Vegas resulted in stories of harassment and rape, and was eventually denounced by the Navy.
between ‘date rape’ and ‘real rape’ that “[takes] place in full view of upstanding eyewitnesses so that it is never simply ‘her word against his’” (Vachss, 1993).

In this last assessment of what the cause was in the swimming pool attacks, the pool is not constructed as especially dangerous, nor are the crimes perpetrated limited to any age, race or class group. But in the thick of a media frenzy around public safety, reporting that reflected this may have felt—in the eyes of the citizens who demand a solution—too abstract from the immediate problem. As one young witness said, “in a couple of days, they ain’t going to be here ... After everybody stops talking about this, the cops will be gone” (Marriott, 1993). When the air cleared of the whirlpooling ‘phenomenon’, each new scene of sexual violence at the pool would be treated as if it were an isolated incident.112

In recounting the whirlpooling case, I identify three different rhetorical ‘sources’ for the violence, including the crowded pool, ‘hip hop culture’, and a more generalized culture of sexual violence. But even parsing these does not make clear why this phenomenon exploded and then seemingly ‘went away’. Sexual assault was statistically reduced by 58.4% in New York City from 1990 – 1998 (NYPD, 2009) though the hip-hop music market continued to grow; rap music was likely not the proximate cause. Stepped-up security at pools under Parks Commissioner Stern could have also reduced the violence.

Understanding how the rhetoric around certain instances or kinds of sexual violence can change our understanding of how ideas of fear are mobilized to change our relationships to public space in the city. In the most prominent modes of interpretation of the whirlpooling attacks, a panic of social decay was sited both at municipal swimming pool, and in its imagined

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112 This is where, as suggested above, it would be useful to know the statistical rate of newspaper (and other media) reporting on sexual assault against police reports, as well as to do some comparative rhetorical analysis.
context through rap music that putatively promoted violence. Recalling the language that Sarah Burns invokes, in her incisive recounting of the false arrest and imprisonment of young Black and Latino men in *the Central Park Five* (2011), “the language and images of these stories, particularly those on the front page, seeped each day into the collective consciousness of the city” (68), feeding fears through stereotypes of class and race.

**Conclusion**

The sexual life construed by and expressed through municipal bathing is multiple in any given space. Sexuality at the bathhouse and the pool operate between and among hetero and homosexual sets of expression regardless of the heteronorms and other modes of bodily enforcement that are in place, and leaves open the potential for many kinds of contests. This chapter has offered an amalgam of moments of rule making, contest, and panic around the interaction of bodies, which showcase how bodies are regulated in public spaces, and how the corporeal public is at all times a sexual public.

Regulation of sex and sexuality occurs both through visible enforcement of some norms of ‘propriety,’ and official indifference regarding sexual play on the other. At times, this occurs through very subtle everyday mechanisms like gender segregated locker rooms and cultural demands for specific styles of costume, and at other times, as in the case of “whirlpooling,” through construing the presence of some bodies in some places as an imminent danger. Techniques of regulation include very direct surveillance (especially in the case of the bathhouse), but also come from outside, such as in the case of the spatial panic described above.
Chapter Six: The Harlem Honeys and Bears

At 9 AM on a Monday morning, soul music radio pours out of a boom box beside Erving, as he sits poolside on a plastic chair accepting pats on the shoulder and kisses on the cheek from the members of the Harlem Honeys and Bears as they stroll out onto the pool deck from the locker rooms. He is a middle-aged Black man, dressed in the Parks Department lifeguard’s uniform of orange t-shirt and orange swim trunks. He greets each team member in turn by name, and with a shy smile. A cloudy sky filters sun in through the skylight in the high, vaulted ceiling; the light bounces off the still surface of the water.

Some team members are already in the pool, warming up and swimming laps in their uniforms of red swimsuits and black bathing caps. Lucille, the group’s oldest member, at a spry 90, has already been in the pool for an hour, her short muscular body moving through the water in long, clean laps of breast stroke, her hair piled on her head in a mound beneath her bathing cap. When asked how far she swims each day, she replies that she just goes until an hour is up, as she loses count of the laps.

The Harlem Honeys and Bears (HHBs) are an African-American Senior Citizen synchronized swim team. Founded in 1979, the group practices two to three days each week at the Parks Department’s Hansborough Recreation Center on 135th Street near Fifth Avenue. In addition to their own practices, performances, and competitions, the group supports a swimming culture for seniors and others at Hansborough pool that includes recreational lap swimming, competing at the New York State Senior Olympics and in other competitions, water aerobics, and youth swim classes.

\[113\] All names given are pseudonyms in compliance with IRB protocol.
In this chapter, I consider how the Harlem Honeys and Bears utilize the municipal pool, at different times taking advantage of, subverting and inverting the programs of building, teaching and regulating central to the municipal bathing project. For the HHBs, the pool provides a facility at low cost ($25/year membership), where urban residents autonomously self-organize in order to care for themselves, their bodies, and one another. In concert with other municipal spaces, including other parts of the recreation center, as well as a low-cost lunch and clubhouse across the street run by the city’s Department for Aging, the autonomy that the group maintains in this space supports a social life in which senior citizens function as healthy people and community leaders.

As synchronized swim practice winds down in the shallow end, participants in a water aerobics class begin to file onto the tiled edges of the pool deck and wait on a cement bench. They sign in on a many-times-over photocopied form tacked to a busy bulletin board – this assures that attendance has been taken. As the HHB’s coach barks his last corrections at the team over the music for the routine—lately it has been _Chariots of Fire_ over and over—the new crop of swimmers circles with brightly colored foam noodles in hand; they lower themselves in at the edges of the water, where there is space. Many of the Honeys and Bears, who have already spent two or more hours in the pool, duck out. But just as many join the aerobics class, standing in tidy rows facing Diana, a team member who directs the action from her wheelchair at the water’s edge. They lift their pool noodles overhead in both hands, and begin counting along rhythmically with the movement of their arms: 1 and 2 and 3 and...

This chapter first describes the built setting for the HHBs, Hansborough Pool, where the group has made use of a poorly maintained municipal space in order to build their community,
as well as the difficulties they face in garnering resources from the Parks Department. This includes the limits of their autonomy as the Parks Department renovates the space, leaving them adrift. Next, I consider how the pool functions as a social space for people who otherwise might be quite isolated, and how that social life is part of a larger process of healing. The third section describes the HHBs’ own practices of teaching swimming, for elders and youth in their community, and how various members think about learning to swim, and swimming in general, in racialized terms.

Hansborough Pool

Many Harlem residents still refer to the Hansborough pool as “the bathhouse,” commemorating a time when its primary feature was 164 showers and 8 tubs for Harlem residents. When it opened on June 1, 1925, this resource for Harlem residents living without hot water in their homes was sorely needed: the New York Times reported that “The only
municipal bathhouse in the Harlem area at present is at Second Avenue and 100th Street, and that was erected about twenty years ago” (“Bathhouse for Harlem,” October 16, 1921). Today the building stands as one of the fifty Parks Department community recreation centers, and one of only eleven that house pools.114

Getting to Hansborough from the subway can be confusing. The address is on 135th street, but in order to get into the building, one must walk down a short dead-end half-block, past a loading door for the grocery store next door, and a small inlet that holds a recycling depot with two machines that accept cans; trash often litters the surrounding sidewalk. A large, fading mural of Black heroes and Harlem community leaders covers a big external wall of the recreation center, but the doorway is around another corner, up five cement stairs (or a wheelchair ramp). Sandwixed between fences that block it from the adjacent properties, the entryway faces a littered parking lot. On the other side of the asphalt, a big sign reading “Kennedy Center” marks a large brick building where the Department for Aging sponsors recreational space and a cafeteria in its basement, and functions as an adjunct to Hansborough for many seniors.

In the front lobby of Hansborough, one or two attendants sit at a desk where they answer phones, point people to various parts of the building, check in members—whom they know casually—and keep an eye on the traffic in and out of the building. Off to the right a slow-moving elevator flanks a staircase, and in between are the administrative offices for the center. To the left of the main doors, upon entry, is a seating area with four couches in a square, surrounding a coffee table with old magazines. This area is often full of elders during the day,

114 The building also contains a basketball court, a weight room, a computer room, some multipurpose rooms, and a rooftop gathering space.
chatting or reading a paper, or watching the TV that is mounted high up in the corner. Faded posters of Black jazz musicians and athletes hang on the walls. The fluorescent lights and dark linoleum tiles are drab and dusty, but there is plenty of daylight, and a friendly tone to the place.

Continuing past the couches, and a bulletin board tacked full with upcoming schedules and classes, are entrances to both men’s and women’s locker rooms. Through a heavy black door, beige tiles cover the walls of the women’s locker room. The main area measures about 25 x 50 feet, with another small alcove at the front with toilets and sinks. Lockers that show rust through their black paint line the walls. Signs hang around the dressing room and toilet area that read, “Do not urinate or comb hair in the shower. Do not comb hair in the sinks.” In the empty area opposite the door from the lobby, black metal folding chairs are set up in a U-shape, where ladies sit while putting on their shoes.

Ten showers, with dividers that hang to about knee height, stand in the center of the room; two rows of five back to back. The water from all ten showers flows to a few common drains. A small dressing cube with a bench fronts each shower stall, hidden from view by a flimsy white plastic curtain. Sometimes yellow caution tape blocks off some of the cubes to signal broken benches. For women with disabilities—or those who simply have limited balance or range of motion, as many of the Harlem Honeys do—the space inside the changing stalls, and in the locker rooms in general, can be hard to negotiate. Like in any locker room, some people are comfortable changing in full view, but many more seek privacy in the corners between the shower stalls and the lockers.

\[115\] I did not have occasion to enter the Men’s locker room.
Some light shines down from fluorescent lights overhead, and some from a big translucent window high at the far end. Through broken acoustical tiles in the ceiling, which must have been installed in later years after the “best public bath” was built, the arc of an earlier orange and yellow vaulted tile ceiling shows through, which continues into the main pool area beyond the locker room.

The place, in general, feels ill maintained and a bit grimy; this is a chief complaint of informants during their interviews.\textsuperscript{116}

The locker is the pits. You know, you gotta close your eyes and not think about it cause you swear you’re catching gangrene and everything else in here, but … we love it! … And I’ve been to other pools in the city where the locker’s nice nice nice. (Sharlene, interview, August 15, 2012)

When I ask the HHBs what they would change about the space, the lockers almost always come up first. “There’s not a locker in there that has a lock that works on the bottom,” Ellen tells me, “I don’t know about the top cause I’m too short. But on the bottom…” Others are frustrated with the staff of the building, whom they see as not caring very much:

The problem is they have people that … that are working for their checks, and they have some kind of city program that they come in and they’re supposed to clean the locker rooms and what have you. And so, you know, I guess people aren’t inspired to do anything. If there’s no promotion in it, you know… (Interview, August 8, 2012)

Marla echoed this sentiment, both in terms of the state of the place, and the treatment of the workers that leads to the run-down atmosphere:

\textsuperscript{116} Some of these complaints are long-standing. A 1964 letter from the United Block Association observes, “this center was reconstructed in 1939 by the Department of Parks and the Federal Work Projects Administration a quarter of a century ago. The residents of Harlem use this center, want this center, and need this center. It appears to us that something can, and should be done about these inadequacies. The United Block Association suggests… improvements,” the first of which is “Modernization of Locker-Shower facilities for those using the pool” (Rolle, May 4, 1964). While some improvements were likely made at the time, ill maintenance has been a problem over the years.
It’s when you go in the lockers the windows are broken. So if it’s winter and you go in the cold water and you come in the locker you’re getting cold, and then the showers are cold. So then there’s rust, the drains have hair all in them. I would hire new workers, for sure. I would pay them more so they’d have some kind of incentive to do what should be done. (Interview, August 17, 2012)

In spite of this, the lockers are where members spend quite a bit of time. This is partly out of necessity – many are slow in bathing, getting dressed, and drying hair. But the locker is also a primary site for socializing before practice, and catching up and making plans after.

Entering the pool area itself, through another set of heavy metal doors painted with many coats of black industrial paint, the space is light and expansive, crowned by a skylight, and a spectator balcony ringing the top; it feels like a formerly beautiful space. Like the locker room, the area is in bad repair: upon my first visit, I notice puddles on the floor from the previous night’s rainstorm, and holes where incandescent lights used to hang, the wires corroded by a leaking ceiling. The vaulted ceiling, tiled in orange and yellow tiles the size of bricks, could use a scrub. Ten or so different kinds of chairs—plastic, folding, one big wooden one—are scattered about the balcony above; the staircase up to the balcony is unheated and gritty, and the doors leading out seem like they will either lock forever, or never close properly.

In spite of this, the space feels cozy, perhaps from the warmth of hand-laid yellow, blue, and green tiles from the WPA era on the walls, adorned with larger squares that feature sea animals in earth-toned relief: seahorses, dolphins, fishes. Depths range from 4 feet at the shallow to 8 at the deep end, where five diving platforms stand at attention. The whole tank is ringed with a raised tile bank, decorated in blue tiles, good for sitting and dangling feet while taking a break, or chatting with swimmers who are in the water.
Though the pool can be restorative to swimmers’ health, pool conditions often aggravate elderly swimmers’ health conditions. One of the most oft-cited complaints by informants was that the water was too cold, both in the pool and in the shower. Cold water came up in almost every visit and interview at Hansborough. (Team members who were serious lap swimmers occasionally remarked that the water was only cold if you stood around in it too long, but they were a minority voice.) Members would show up for practice and then sit out, worried that the cold water would aggravate arthritis or other ailments.

They come in with the thermometer, they drop it in the water and they go oh, it’s … some degrees. I think your thermometer’s broken cause my body’s telling me it’s like 60. Your joints hurt. That’s when you know it’s too cold, when your bones start hurting. (interview, August 17, 2012)

The Honeys and Bears organization had bought team members wet suits,¹¹⁷ but even fully outfitted, many could not bear the cold water. Many team members reported that there had once been a standing thermometer in the water, but it broke often and then, after too many complaints from the group, it was removed, never to be seen again. Many took this as a sign of the indifference of the Parks Department to the needs of people in Harlem, and especially the needs of senior citizens.

For others, especially team members with asthma, the cold water was hard on their lungs. Thea is one such member. She has a big smile, and a lilt to her voice; she coils her hair in a thick braid on top of her head, and puts a red cloth bathing cap over it, and then a white rubber one. Like many in the group, she learned to swim later in life. On different occasions, she casually talks the troubles she has with her lungs — she has been intubated five times, and

¹¹⁷ The organization holds some small amount of money from member dues and donations, as well as grants that they occasionally receive from community foundations.
cold water is quite hard on her. “The water is very cold, very cold. With this coughing and my asthma, you know. But I still try to get in, you know. Cause I love the water, you know. And I was trying to find out, is it the chlorine? But even if the doctor says it’s the chlorine, I’m not gonna stop! No. No, I don’t think I could.”

On one occasion, I arrived at the rec center to find the team members out front, irate. They saw the thermometer, they said, and the water was only 70 degrees. I ran into Coach, as he exited the building. “This is terrible,” he said. There is often a problem with cold water on Monday mornings, he explains, because no one is there on Sundays to check. There used to be someone that came in on Sundays, he continues, “but they fired him. They always fire the good people.” Coach thought it might take until Wednesday to get the pool warm enough. He noted that the pool should be about 81 degrees for the old people, and about 78 for competitive swimmers. 70 was too cold for anyone. No one was at the pool: most had already heard about the water temperature and had not shown up. It turned out, on that day, that a crack had opened in the bottom of the pool, and it would stay closed for two weeks until they fixed it. But the conversations with team members and Coach betrayed a lack of confidence in the Parks Department for maintaining their building more generally.

At various times, Parks officials came in to take a look around the pool and the locker room, one marching into the women’s locker room with a roll of blueprints in hand, but few people knew exactly what they were inspecting or when it would happen. Team members describe a lot of frustration with trying to get services from public agencies, Hansborough as one among many. In one interview, I asked one team affiliate, Don, why he thought it was taking so long.
D: Cause it’s a bureaucratic system, and it’s in the city of New York, and it’s in Harlem. Let me change that – it’s in Harlem so it’s gonna be slow because they think we don’t need things. Or if we do need things we can wait.

N: Do you want to say anything more about that?

D: No that’s self-explanatory. If you in the inner city, you gonna get your services last. Check the record.
(Interview, August 15, 2012)

Many conversations like this one show that team members see a long pattern of inability to tap into system of City resources, and power to control those resources.

Social life

The social life of the Honeys and Bears begins with swimming as a common starting point, but resonates far outside of the walls of the pool. As much as the healing power of time spent in the water, seniors in the group describe their participation with others as making them happier, and more fulfilled. Erving, the lifeguard, recounts that seniors will just sometimes faint in the water, and how he saves them all the time. It’s hard, he says, because “when I save them they’re afraid I’ll tell their doctor and they won’t be able to come be with their friends no more.” Fainting is not so bad a fate as isolation.

Everyday socializing that I witnessed happened in two main places: in and around the pool, including the locker rooms and lobby at Hansborough, and at “Kennedy,” the senior center funded by the Department of Aging, and housed in the basement floor of the Joseph P. Kennedy Center owned by Catholic Charities. The center, where members of the Honeys and Bears most often went after practice, offers a low-cost lunch that serves many kinds of dietary needs, and a lounge with a pool table and sofas. For members of the group, Kennedy
functioned as an extension of the rec center, making the public spaces as services a more expansive landscape. Without Kennedy, members would go home and eat lunch alone, or perhaps spend time with family. While some still worked or volunteered regularly, many filled a good part of their days with this: eating lunch and then shooting pool, or sitting and chatting.

Outside events are also part of the pulse of the group. The team’s oldest member, Lucille, held her 90th birthday in a Harlem club, where most team members would be in attendance. Team members often stood up at the end of practice to announce barbeques, dance class recitals, and various celebrations. Rochelle, who had started a hat-making group at the rec center, organized a high tea honoring Harlem women leaders including the Chief of Staff at Harlem hospital; the event, held in the upstairs gym at Hansborough, included poetry, music, a performance by a tap dance troupe (in which another group member performed), and finally a parade of hats, with prizes awarded to the best designs.

During Harlem Week, in the summer of 2012, the group performed a synchronized swim tribute to Whitney Houston, who had passed away the previous year, and they had practiced hard for weeks before. The pool balcony, usually empty, was packed that day, with parents, grandparents and siblings of children who learned to swim with the Honeys and Bears, as well as other community supporters. Before the performance, seniors competed lightheartedly with youth, some in individual events and others in relay races, including a kickboard race for the tiniest children. Members boasted of having taught now-competitive high school swimmers their first strokes here at Hansborough, when they were very small; now they suggested that these kids were ‘Olympic material.’ Former members of the group turned up in numbers, and a
potluck lunch of huge trays of homemade food followed in the rec center’s gym, which continued for the whole afternoon.

In spite of deep frustration with the physical plant of the pool and the Parks Department, the Honeys and Bears constantly express how much at home they feel there. Sharlene describes the trip she makes most days to be at Hansborough: “But, you know, even when I don’t have to come up here I come up here. Cause I live, I live really near the Chelsea pool... But it’s not the same flavor. It’s not the same flavor. It’s clean but it ain’t the same flavor.” Team members attribute this, variously, to increased health, the inspiration they derive from the other members and, curiously, the size of the pool. Pat explains,

I don’t like the pools that I think competition. Riverbank, you been up there? Competition. Because if you look at that they’re like, real state of the art. You look at that, you think ohmigod, I gotta dive in and I gotta swim as fast as I can. I don’t feel that way here. I feel relaxed here, I feel relaxed here. So, this is... this type of pool is my ideal pool, right here. My neighborhood pool, my pool.
(Interview, August 13, 2012)

Hansborough is what the Parks Department labels an ‘intermediate pool,’ meaning smaller than Olympic sized, which is perhaps what the cozy feel of the space is attributable to. But the camaraderie is what members gesture at when they refer to the pool as their home, their place, the space where they feel most comfortable. In this public space that they have adopted they find community, and in community another source of care.
Healing waters

N: ... So tell me about swimming.
Don (swimmer): That’s very general. Ok, so this is easy then. Swimming is a very therapeutic exercise. And therapeutic meaning swimming solves most problems in general.
N: You think?

(Interview, August 15, 2012)

The value of water for soothing and healing skeleto-muscular ailments has long been an adjunct to western medicine, offered in many different guises. The ‘water cure’ movement of the 19th century (Cayleff, 1987; Porter, 1990; Weiss, 1967) offered patients “its staunch faith in nature's ability to heal, its economic accessibility, its efficacy through changes in personal habits and the medical encounter..." (Cayleff, 1987, p. 16). Today, gyms offer low-impact water aerobics classes, and physical therapy centers use hot water tubs as medicine. Attributed to properties including weightlessness, osmotic pressure, or a meditative style of exercise, water is understood to tone muscles and brighten moods.

While ‘doctor-talk’ is common in everyday chatting around the pool – next visits, medications, aches and pains – most HHBs seem to trust regular immersion in the water as the best bearer of good health. Doctors and western medicine are, in fact, a source of great anxiety and swimming is discussed in direct opposition to medicalized health, like when Lucille tells me “5 days a week, it’s what keeps me out of the doctor’s office.” The pool is where members can reliably look after their own health. The HHBs also appreciate being around other seniors who are active in reducing their own ailments; as one informant noted, when he first joined the Honeys and Bears he noticed that they didn’t have a lot of pain in their bodies, whereas other
men with whom he socializes “sit around and play cards all day and complain about pain.”

Among the 15 members of the group that I interviewed, all described themselves or fellow teammates having been ‘cured’ by the water, mentally or physically. A member who had a stroke now walks with a cane, while another who was told she would have to have surgery to replace both knees now walks un-aided. “Swimming is wonderful. It’s... come in with a cane, come in with a scooter, come in with a walker, whatever, and when you get in that water, the challenges are gone because you are weightless in the water” (Pat, Interview, August 13, 2012).

In other cases, it is minds and souls that the water has cured. “I think this pool saved my life,” Marla tells me.

I got laid off. ... I sat at home for three months, crying. I was depressed. I couldn’t find a job. I felt worthless, I felt useless, I felt... There was just nothing for me. And I said to myself, I see why people get hooked on drugs. Cause that’s the first thing you see when you walk outside is somebody ... and you say hmm. And I walked over here one day to the gym, and I’ve never stopped. The water. I could smell it from outside. (Interview, August 17, 2012)

While not everyone expressed it in this way, team members often casually mentioned their brightened moods and feelings of ‘being blessed’ by the regular swimming practice with the team. A swimmer named Faith gets on the train at 7 am from East New York/Canarsie, and takes a 90-minute train ride all the way to Harlem in order to be at the pool by 8:45. It’s a long way, but it’s worth it to her. She comes here even when she is sick, just to watch. “I used to swim like a rock,” she says, but now she is part of the team. Last week, she admits, she couldn’t do the routine, and she got out of the water crying. But the team coaxed her back, and she will try again. This is just a really special group of people, she tells me again and again, so supportive and “just so awesome” (Notes, March 26, 2012).
In many cases, team members have ‘beat’ the advisement of the medical establishment and become physically well through the force of their own regular attendance at the pool. “At age 60 I injured my shoulder,” Beatrice tells me, “and I have a partial rotator cuff tear that they wanted to operate on, and after many months of physical therapy, the doctor said I’m gonna meet you in the emergency room, there’s no more we can do for you. And I came here, did the aerobics, and that’s it” (Interview, August 13, 2012). This sort of recovery is not only attributed to getting into the water, but also to the dedication of attending 3 – 5 days per week.

In some accounts, members have been ‘prescribed’ swimming by their practitioners, such as Martha, who was due to have both knees replaced. She describes her recovery as a combination of prayer, and a visit to a holistic doctor:

As a matter of fact, he said swim! I said I can’t swim! He says, well, learn how to swim! He said that water is your best therapy that you can get. And so I ended up coming to the Hansborough pool. I didn’t know how to swim. I started out trying to take the water aerobics, and I was very fearful of the water. So I would be holding on to the wall, even with the water aerobics, and the instructor at that time would say Let go of that wall! Let go of that wall! Sometimes she would come over and say let me hold you! (Interview, August 6, 2012)

Since that time, she has learned to swim, and now performs in routines with the team.

Though not a member of the synchronized swim group, Carla represents another side of the senior swimming culture at Hansborough that is supported by the HHBs: she learned to swim at 69 and is now 80. She gets around in a wheelchair, owing to a number of physical maladies: he had open-heart surgery some time ago, after which she couldn’t swim for 4 months, which really set her back. But now she is doing well -- not on any medications, she declares proudly. When Carla rises from her wheelchair to swim, she stands with some difficulty, supported by a cane that unfolds as she pulls it out of the bag strapped to the back of
the chair. Her back is hunched, and she looks much older as she walks; one leg is noticeably rather more underdeveloped than the other, resulting from polio she contracted as a child. She calls to the lifeguard to help her into the white plastic chair affixed to a pole beside the pool, which will lower her into the water, where she moves her body weightlessly for an hour or so, swimming steady lengths of crawl or elementary backstroke, foam barbells in each hand. While she insists that she is not interested in learning and performing routines, she practices her exercises at the far end of the pool as the team practices, alone but not isolated.

Fear of water, or a one-time fear, is quite common among the swimmers. I hear stories from various members of near drowning as children or having heard of other children drowning. Delila has short relaxed hair dyed a faded fire engine red, lots of makeup including small false eyelashes, and hoop earrings with sparkly beads hanging from the bottom. She wears a black swimsuit and track pants, her keys pinned with a safety pin to the chest of the suit. She learned to swim here at Hansborough 10 years ago; now she is 69. She recounts that when she was about 11 years old, she went out in a rowboat with another girl and the girl’s brother. The rowboat tipped over, and the girl drowned; the brother saved Delila but couldn’t save his sister. That incident stayed with her throughout her whole life. Also, she goes on a lot of cruises, and she wanted to be sure – if nothing else – that she could at least float a while in the water if something happened. In this case, the skill of learning to be in the water also healed a traumatic memory.

The belief in healing pervades not only bodies but also attitudes among the group. Diana, who leads the water aerobics class from her wheelchair, refers to her injuries and illness – which include a stroke and a fractured hip over the past few years—only as “my challenges,”
and credits the group with encouraging her to keep showing up, week after week: while she was away for surgery and recovery, they sent her cards and organized meals. Like so many, she learned to swim here at Hansborough as an adult. Over the year that I spent with the HHBs, she went from watching the action in the water from her wheelchair during practice for a number of months, to lowering into the pool on a lift with a buoyant belt strapped around her waist so she could get the muscle tone back in her arms and legs. Because of her kindness and commitment to the group, as well as her tenacity, Diana served as a real source of inspiration, and members have a tremendous amount of affection for her. During the group’s Harlem Week performance, Diana closed the show by being lowered into the water on the chair lift, and swimming an improvised water dance to That’s What Friends Are For with two other women from the group, as the rest stood along the shallow end, singing and swaying along. The performance was met with a standing ovation.

**Learning to swim, teaching to swim**

Jerome teaches new swimmers, most of them over 50. He stands at the edge of the shallow end in long black spandex swim trunks, shirtless; a raised ridge beneath the skin in his chest near his shoulder must be a pacemaker or other medical device. Even though he is in his eighties—his white hair bright in a room where everyone else is wearing a swim cap—he has a long-time athlete’s body and he is not bashful. He has been lifeguarding since he was 16, and teaching swimming for most of his life. On an average Monday morning, he has a group of ten or so women in the water – and they are almost always women – to whom he will be shouting energetically: *Kick out not down! Keep your legs up!* His students are clumsy, if earnest, in the
water, and many team members tell me that they first learned to swim here. Some days they practice jumping into the water. A big woman stands on the tiled step beside the pool, jumps, tucks her legs, and executes an amazing cannonball. Splash! Others fall in, do a half twist in the air. One woman walks by, muttering, “I still can’t jump into that pool.”

To those who already know how to swim, Jerome teaches diving. Those who are new to it get to the edge of the pool, reach arms out into a narrow V, hands touching; often they bounce their knees and hesitate, maybe jump. Occasionally a dive is quite graceful, but most are uncomfortable, splashy belly flops. This seems quite a risk for old bodies, but no one seems much to mind or worry for their safety. Another time, they practice handstands in the water. For new swimmers, it’s quite hard to dive down to the bottom and to stay there. One woman in a white swim cap with a chinstrap manages it after a few awkward tries, her ankles flailing against the air above the water, and the group applauds.

An adjunct to learning to swim and joining the team is the HHB’s youth swim classes. Although not advertised as such, these classes are an intergenerational response to the high rates of drowning among Black and Latino children (as described in Chapter Four). This is a problem that team members are acutely aware of: on my first day at Hansborough, a team member called Bob brought up this issue not long into our first conversation: “It’s a sport,” he tells me, “but it will also help you survive.” He and at least two other team members mentioned the youth swim group, of which they are quite proud.

When asked about why Black youth are not able to swim, in interviews, members offered reasons ranging from a historic lack of access to pools and to lessons for Black people in general, to a reluctance for girls and women to get their hair wet, while some brushed past with
universalizing tones such as “there are all kinds of children learning to swim today.” But many also insisted that the common wisdom that Black people just don’t swim is changing in the US, and many cited the Olympics – which were taking place in London at the time of the interviews – as a great example of the expansion of popular ideas of “who belongs” in particular sports. At least four of the Harlem Honeys (women) that I interviewed mentioned the problem of getting Black women to swim because of concerns about hair. While all clearly disagreed with this premise, as they all swam themselves, one pair of interviewees saw this as a generational divide, having to do with children not respecting their parents:

N: [laughing] wait, can we get back to this issue of... so how do you get girls on your team if they’re really worried about their hair and about their hair getting wet? What do you say to them?
D: Well, you can tell them they have to use a bathing cap. And they have to dry it... and if the mothers wanting their children to learn how to swim... At that time, you see, children didn’t tell the mothers what to do. At that time the mothers told the children what to do.
E: Exactly!
D: And that was what was done.
E: Exactly!
D: Nowadays, children tell their parents what to do, it wasn’t like that then. It was, you’re gonna learn how to swim, when you get home we’ll take care of your hair.

(Interview, Ellen and Diana, August 6, 2012)

A “kids these days” kind of argument won’t necessarily hold up for larger cultural explanations, nor will it solve the problem. Yet their approach is not precious, and perhaps effective because of it.

Before the team’s Harlem Week performance, Coach got up to welcome everybody to the ceremony. But before he introduced the team, he tilted his gaze up to the now-full balcony where parents and grandparents were assembled on chairs and up against the railings and raised his voice: “Black children are drowning because they do not know how to swim. This has
got to stop! Bring them to us, the lessons are free, and we will teach them.” The room was silent for a beat, and then the performance began.

The HHBs have taken the teaching element of the municipal bathing project into their own hands. Youth classes met on Tuesdays and Thursdays after school. These were not offered to the exclusion of Parks Department classes, which were offered after school and during vacations, but members of the team couldn’t tell me much about those. That said, it was also unclear, at least to me, how to sign up for the HHB’s lessons. As HHB Martha told me in an interview, “People’s grandchildren, their children, and ... so forth and so on. Uh-huh. I really don’t know how it’s really being advertised. But I know that the children are coming in” (Interview, August 6, 2012). Although it went unsaid, the classes that the HHBs ran were based in longer-term community involvement, by the team members, for children and for their parents. A Parks Department instructor was no impediment, but didn’t have the same pull with community members.

An earlier iteration of youth swimming at Hansborough also included a swim team called Sumakee, run by Diana and another male coach. She liked her role, because in addition to swimming, she could help the kids with home problems and homework, talk to parents, get grants for the team, get uniforms for kids who couldn’t afford them, etc. Eventually, the male coach didn’t want to do it on a volunteer basis anymore, and it got to be too much for her to do all the administration and all the coaching, so they stopped. Diana keeps in touch with the former team members now; she says that they all graduated high school and college. She saw one on a recent trip to Maryland, who is now the head of a company. “There’s something about swimming that translates into your life – they were all successful” (Interview, August 6, 2012).
Discussing race and swimming

Discussions of youth were often an entrée into talking about the race divide in swimming. In an interview with Louis, one of the team’s younger members, who had learned to swim as a child, which he attributes to having grown up in a majority white town in Long Island. He recalled time spent as a lifeguard:

L: It was hard to get kids – African-American kids – interested in swimming. It could be for many different reasons. You know. And sometimes we’re a product of our environment. If they see swimming and they don’t see any African-American kids, then they believe that’s something they’re not supposed to do.

N: What do you think some of the other reasons could be?

L: A lack of pools in the Black high schools, certainly. If there are more pools in the district... when you go to a majority of Black schools, let’s say on Long Island, in the suburbs or urban areas, you’ll see very few pools there. You know? At least pools big enough to be competitive, like swim meets, you know. So that’s certainly ... that they don’t have enough pools in schools and stuff like that.

(Interview, August 19, 2012)

Here, Louis describes access as being the problem, both in terms of spatial distribution and in terms of belonging. He went on to say (as did a number of others) that having a role model in Olympic medalist swimmer, Gabby Douglas, who grew up in New York City could have a big impact upon making Black youth feel that swimming is a sport where they could belong.

In discussing their own lives, team members had a complex relationship to the history of racism at municipal pools in America. Having mostly been raised in New York – and in Harlem specifically – many of them grew up both with fairly regular access to the pools in their own neighborhoods, but also with the legacy of segregation and exclusion from other parts of the city, the racist legacy of Robert Moses, and the rumors (unconfirmed: see Gutman, 2007) that his Parks administration kept the water cold in pools in Black neighborhoods.
Excellent treatments of race and public swimming pools published in the last few years (Gutman, 2008; Wiltse, 2007) illustrate the long story of racism, and of white resistance, both at the state and popular level, to sharing water with people of color in urban centers, including the decision on the part of many cities, such as Birmingham and Atlanta, to close municipal pools rather than integrate them in the Civil Rights era. One informant remembers quite clearly growing up learning to swim at Cleveland pools where “colored swim” happened once a week, after which the pool was drained and scrubbed before white swimmers immersed themselves in the water once again.

That said, team members were often reluctant to speak about the race divide in swimming among adults. I asked team members about what it meant to them to identify as Black swimmers and, perhaps owing to my position as a young white woman, or perhaps because they did not feel it had to be stated or described, many brushed past the question. Team member Pat responded as follows:

**N:** Do you think there’s something different about it being a Black swim team?

**P:** You know, I never thought about that. I just kind of thought about us as a senior synchronized swim team. I never thought, yeah, we are Black. Huh. That’s right, that’s right. We are Black – I forgot about that. We’re Black and we’re old, that’s right. I was thinking we’re old, we’re old. But we’re Black and we’re old. So that’s a double whammy.

**N:** Could you talk about it a little bit?

**J:** Yeah, I guess so. I guess we…

**N:** You could talk about being a senior swim team also.

**J:** You know what? I’ll tell you, I guess we probably get a little more attention, maybe because we are black and we’re a senior synchronized swim team. And we’re from Harlem, I guess, but I never really thought about it in terms of being Black. I thought about it in terms of it being a senior synchronized swim team.
But, um, yeah, these ladies have been together for years and years and years. I’m just sort of one of the new kids on the block.

(Interview, August 13, 2012)

In one exceptionally candid interview, however, a team member talked about race in terms of the change in complexion of the Honeys and Bears over time:

M: But if you look back in our archives, at the original synchronized swimmers, they were very bright. There weren’t many of me in there. They were very very bright. The original Harlem Honeys and Bears were about your complexion... Ask [Thelma]. You see how light [Thelma] is? She’s an original. So that’s how they looked. It looked better to the public eye than these dark skins in bathing suits, half-naked. (Interview, August 17, 2012)

Here, we see how bodies are regulated in municipal bathing spaces not only by the state, but by other hegemonic structures of power as well, in this case racism.

The HHBs and the Parks Department

Although the HHBs make tremendous use of the pool at Hansborough, their relationship of the Parks Department to the Honeys and Bears is fraught. On one hand, the group is noted on the Parks Department website, and often showcased at Parks events. At a 75th anniversary celebration for the WPA Pools at the Red Hook pool in summer 2011, the HHBs were lauded as a great group that the municipal pools made possible. In summer 2012, a special performance at the Thomas Jefferson Pool in Harlem kicked off the expansion of Senior Swim hours at the outdoor pools (Mays, 2012). Unlike the ceremonies of the Moses days, held with great fanfare, a big local audience, and brass bands, few people were in attendance to watch on the hot pool deck, and the performance seemed to be mostly for the TV cameras. Salsa music played from big speakers on the deck, and bottles of water were handed out. The Parks Department officials
there from ‘downtown’ wore unseasonable suits and ties, and so stood apart from the action, under shade trees rather than on the sunny pool deck. The Honeys and Bears were excited for the opportunity to perform, and the Parks Department enjoys the media opportunity it offers them, but the overall effect was a bit awkward, particularly with the knowledge that the group has a hard time getting the Parks Department’s attention otherwise, over issues like maintenance and water temperature.

One winter day, when I arrived at the pool and found very few team members swimming, Coach informed me that a number of them had gone down to City Hall, to talk to Inez Dickens, their local city council member. Ten years prior, he explained, Hansborough was promised a renovation, and millions of dollars were earmarked. The ‘dome’ was replaced, he said, referring to the vaulted glass skylight at the top of the high ceiling, and a low-hanging heating system all around the bottom of the balcony was removed. But nothing else happened. He points to the long cracks still in the bottom of the pool that have been patched repeatedly and sighs, “it’s just an antiquated system.”

It was never clear if team members had, in fact, visited Dickens that day, but in interviews, a number of informants describe organizing efforts around the repair and maintenance of Hansborough that had gone on at various times in the group’s history, including establishing a conservancy to support the center financially, and to organize to take up more formal complaints with the city. Although they had occasionally gotten the ear of various public officials, the Parks Department bureaucracy proved difficult to penetrate. Diana and Ellen describe their efforts:

At one point we had a lady here who was the center manager. And we formed an advisory committee, cause she was saying ... here’s the budget for this place,
and would anybody be interested in helping her decide how to spend the money on this budget. So I started this committee called the Hansborough Advisory Committee, and people like [Ellen] and other people who swim and use the facility would come. We’d try to meet once a month. We’d try and have Parks people come and hear our concerns. They came, and since they didn’t pay much attention to the things that we were saying, I think the people got disinterested, and we got to a place where you would have two or three people that were coming, and then you got to a place where I would come and I didn’t come, and that would be it. So it sort of petered out. I have been thinking maybe we could start it again. (Interview, August 6, 2012)

During my time at the pool, I often heard reports that the renovation was about to begin, but as team members had been hearing these for so long that they regarded them as little more than rumors, I began to as well. In an interview, Pat describes the process:

I don’t know why it’s taken so long. We though that the repairs would be made by now because, actually last year, early last year, last January of … 2011, they gave us the impression that the pool was gonna close during the summer for nine months. And everything would be done… but nothing happened. Nobody came to do anything. (Interview, August 13, 2012)

How the decision was ultimately made to renovate Hansborough at the end of 2012 remains unclear. Perhaps workers at the center knew, but notices were not hung in any public area in advance of the closure.

When the renovations finally did begin, the group was informed only a week before they were required to find a new space. A New York Times blog post reported that “Vickie Karp, a spokeswoman for the parks department, said that because the Honeys and Bears were not part of an official parks program, the city was not responsible for finding them a new practice space during the renovation” (Turkewitz, 2012). As the group had learned not to count on promises of upcoming renovations from the Parks department, they had not made arrangements for an alternate space. A YMCA just down the street was prohibitive in cost to many members. As Sharlene told me, “when I think of the Y, I just see money signs. It’s just so
expensive... I don’t even know what the membership is these days, I guess three hundred and something, I have no idea. So, you know, I never even think of that” (Interview, August 15, 2012). Some had suggested that they would be going to Saint Mary’s pool in the Bronx – a long way to travel for many Harlem residents. Another possibility was Riverbank Park pool at 125th street on the West Side, but because that pool is operated by a state park with a different pricing structure, the low membership fee of city-run pools, on which so many members with fixed incomes depend, would not be available.

A call to the facility in winter of 2013 got me the building’s administrator, who said that the group has sort of broken up. Some come to aerobics classes in the gym, led by Marla on Mondays and Fridays; some are practicing at Saint Mary’s and others at Riverbank; still others, who are able, have purchased memberships to the YMCA down the street. It’s not clear if the group ever practices as a group, or if they plan on getting back together after the renovation. But more troubling is that their social center of gravity seems to have dissipated. If a member does not appear for practice, it is more difficult to know where they have gone. Without a center, no one counts heads to see what happened to these, the ideal denizens of public space, utilizing the facilities and building a social life together.

Conclusion

The poorly maintained physical plant over time, coupled with the disorganization of the group that occurred around the renovation of the pool at Hansborough Recreation Center were hard on the Honeys and Bears. In the summer, some anxiety floated around the group about whether they would have as much autonomy over their space once the pool was renovated.
Some thought a renovation at the moment of a fee increase (even if not for seniors), might also presage a tightening of restrictions - members could be overheard talking about how much stricter policies like paying registration and signing in would become after the renovation, though no one knew if or when that day would arrive. Occasional comments about the gentrification of Harlem have neighborhood denizens feeling pushed out of the neighborhood in their everyday lives, and a ‘nicer’ pool may limit the kind of organizational and social autonomy they have become accustomed to.

This chapter illustrates how the Honeys and Bears mobilize low-cost access to a municipal swimming pool in order to care for themselves and their community: physically, mentally, and emotionally. This includes teaching one another to swim, the self-care of showing up at the pool every day for therapeutic purposes, organizing events together to helping out with swim classes in order, teach neighborhood youth the skills they need, not only to survive in the water, but also to enjoy it.

In each of these cases, the group enters into negotiations with the building, teaching and regulating modes of producing corporeal publics through the municipal bathing project, sometimes operating on their own terms, and at others running into conflicts with the Parks Department. While bodies like the Honeys and Bears’ are often excluded from being one display in the water—for being old, for being Black, and in some cases for being disabled—their use of the water includes them in a public, even if the physical spaces where that public belongs are often neglected. In turn, the neglect of the physical plant of Hansborough pool, for the group, was coupled with some autonomy in their use of the space, including teaching one another, and establishing places of healing.
Chapter Seven: Conclusion

The municipal bathing project includes programs of building the hydrosocial infrastructure for the circulation of water, bodies, and ideas; of teaching people techniques and habits of fitness, wellness, hygiene and survival; and of the regulation of access to and participation in physical spaces through programs of rulemaking, surveillance and fees. In the archival and ethnographic research presented here, I have shown how the municipal bathing project in New York City has incorporated various ideals around social life in public space over almost 150 years in an attempt to produce a qualified public to go with the spaces. Agents of the municipal state, along with other organizations achieved this project in various periods in and through a putatively universal public.

In this conclusion, I first outline how the different chapters of this dissertation organize the contests around what a corporeal public is and does. Following a summary of chapters and their main ideas, I return to some of the questions that initially motivated this project, as they relate to the contemporary moment, and consider why some questions were difficult to answer, or how they led to other questions, some of which now seem more significant in the course of research. I will discuss the shift from thinking about ‘the pool’ as the site of research to the much longer story of municipal bathing.

Throughout the dissertation runs the theme of persistence, this question of what stays on in a place or landscape, when its ostensible ‘replacement’ has been found or implemented, not only how it continues to exist, but how it operates in tension with other physical structures and the ideas behind them. Persistence can apply to physical structures as well as practices that include buildings, user fees, and beliefs about what it means to be healthy, safe or skilled.
These elements, such as the long run of the last bathhouse at Allen Street, or East River swimming, are examples of “the anomaly”—the thing that ought not occur or exist, but does—that I mention in Chapter One.

In Chapter Two, the building element of municipal bathing is framed in terms of infrastructure: matter that moves matter, physical parts that make up systems. While the pipes and aqueducts that lead to the pools and baths rest on the broader infrastructure for conveying water in the system, the sites for bathing convey a public, too, of bodies and of ideas about bodies. These ideas are co-constructed with the physical shape, size and materials used in enclosed bathing places. In this way, water both removes dirt and introduces cleanliness. Further, they are imagined as a system, at different times, in the eyes of elites, agents of the municipal state (especially the Department of Parks) and various groups making demands for their provision.

In Chapter Three, the regulation of municipal bathing is brought to the fore through the question of whether or not people should be charged a fee for entry to pools and baths, and how that impacts the public character of the spaces. This is tied up in the larger question of belonging, which is a positive expression of the element of access in the definition of public space I offer here. Fees are one way to establish who belongs in the bath or pool, to what extent and at what times. This chapter also raises the question: to what extent are children members of a larger public, or even separate public? Who hails this public, and who is accountable to it? Children are also not a unitary group, but rather are inflected with markers of race, class, gender and sexuality. The particular argument over the free period for children in
the 1930s – 1950s also demonstrates the anxiety provoked when members of the public, in this case children, do not adhere to state expectations of class identification and behavior.

Young people also take a central role in the story of state provision of swimming lessons, told in Chapter Four. While each iteration of state swimming lessons seems singular in purpose—to keep children from drowning—we see here the socio-cultural sets in which it was embedded, race and gender especially. Swimming lessons, while a mode of teaching, have often served as a cover for regulation, or to satisfy the demands of elites who demonstrate concern over what they have perceived as disorderly play in the sites of municipal bathing. Here, the contest over the function of public spaces and the terms of public life are wrapped up in a rhetoric of skill and survival. The kinds of bodies that are cultivated in the water are matched to questions of order and disorder in the spaces themselves.

Concern for order in a broader sense is presented in Chapter Five. Pools and bathhouses catalyze some disputes around the sexual order of cities, in their public spaces, but also in the phantom opposite of their private spaces, including home and commercial bathing spaces. This occurs overtly, through gendered locker rooms and bathing costumes, but also through acts of security and surveillance. The case of whirlpooling demonstrates how anxieties of race, youth, and sexual mores were cast over the spaces of the outdoor pools, whipping up what I refer to as a spatial panic. This recalls the original conflict that led to the river baths, in which the bodies of naked boys were controlled through enclosure of the riverbanks.

Finally, in Chapter Six, the story of the Harlem Honeys and Bears describes the engagement with, and appropriation of, the municipal bathing project by a group that is alternately admired and neglected by the municipal state. As an all-Black all-senior citizen
synchronized swimming group, the Honeys and Bears participate in an arena that is asynchronous with many stereotypes surrounding their identities. In turn, they mobilize the public space of Hansborough Pool in order to offer swim lessons and organize swim teams with and for the youth of their community, even as the Parks department offers lessons in the same space.

Taken together, these chapters outline contests over public space, that pivot on the identity (both self-identified and imposed) of the public and publics whose bodies animate these amphibious spaces. By demonstrating the changes in the style and attitudes of these spaces over time, both material and symbolic, we also come to see more clearly the character of the social realm through which these contests are negotiated. The proposal for this dissertation opened with the question: *How does the municipal swimming pool work and what work does it do?* The following sections offer some ethnographic material through which to consider contemporary conflicts and challenges at New York’s municipal pools. In order to revisit this question.

**How does the pool operate today?**

The intention of the question about how the pool ‘works’ was to be technical, to reveal the pipes and pumps and labor that cause the pools operate as healthy, safe places for people to swim and play. But this line of inquiry also suggest spatial choices of distribution of goods throughout the city, and the political will and capital that surround them, thus indicating something about systems of power and who they are meant to serve. To know about the operations of the pool—what goes into making it open each season, and each day of the
season— is to decipher the circuits beyond the physical infrastructure, such as the Parks budgets devoted to capital, maintenance and labor. Understanding the resources and political will that go into these elements helps to elucidate the role of municipal bathing in the larger production of publics and spaces in the city.

In the archive, I could begin to understand the direction and the disputes that went into opening, and then maintaining, the structures such as river baths and bath houses that no longer exist, or do not exist in their original form. In the conflicts over keeping the bathhouses running, or whether or not to repair the river baths in the 1940s, for instance, many choices were made based on budget allocations and materials available. Debates over expenses in other periods involved the employment of towel attendants, the costs of repairing leaks in water systems, and with remaining technologically current in systems of pumps and filters.

In an almost day-long interview and observation with the Deputy Director of Operations at the Parks Department in the Bronx, I got a feel for the tremendous operation that goes into just getting the pools open for the summer at present. This includes interviewing and hiring pool managers and supervisors, seasonal Parks Enforcement Police (PEP) officers, lifeguards, filter plant operators and job training participants; training all filter plant operators in basic filtration mechanics, water chemistry, etc.; organizing tradespeople to turn on water, heat and electricity; scrubbing, scraping and repainting all surfaces of every bathhouse; scouring, painting and stenciling the actual swimming tanks; ordering hundreds of gallons of chemicals.\textsuperscript{118}

\textsuperscript{118} One of the greatest sanitary advancements in pools in general, and what made the Moses pools ‘state of the art’ are the systems of filtration, replacing the early ‘fill and draw’ tanks, in which the pool was filled once every few days and then drained completely and scrubbed, like a bathtub, before being re-filled. Today, most of these have been replaced with closed tanks that are less efficient but easier to operate and harder to damage. Still, some of the original open bed sand filters persist at Parks pools, which use layers of sand and activated charcoal to run the water through – these require skilled labor to monitor the water chemistry.
This is all to say, part of the way the pool ‘works’ is through people working, through a fairly large program of laborers, materials and logistics. These are not inconsequential when a shrinking Parks Department budget requires, for example, that seasonal workers be taken from their regular jobs in the boroughs. As she explains:

T: Well it’s complicated in the sense that you’re pulling staff out of the borough that you would be expecting to run your borough operation and now you’re asking them to run a completely different operation with a whole other new set of staffing and currently with the budgetary constraints we’re not able to replace them in the borough.

N: I see. So there are just holes in the summer.

T: Correct. And the grass grows higher and the garbage builds up, in peak season when we need people more in the parks because we just took them all and sent them to the pools, to run the pool operation. Which is an operation we don’t run the rest of the year. And I just explained to you how many resources we pour into it to get it up and running. Look at the staffing … all of that is at the cost of the district operation. To maintain all the other parks in the borough.

N: Is there anybody inside of Parks advocating for a bigger parks budget or … is it not really possible?

T: I mean, I don’t know that there’s any one person that would not advocate for a bigger budget.

N: Right.

T: We are one of the smallest agencies for the City of New York. I guess in many ways not everyone sees green space as like, top of the agenda, like sanitation, you know, if the garbage is not picked up … there’s a problem. Department of Health was significantly cut as well. Um, you know and then there are the people like DOT that have tremendous budgets. … agencies. But remember… I think the Parks department still doesn’t even get one percent of the city’s budget. I think we’re still at 0.5. And then the mayor forced everybody to take a cut, and to make it fair he made it equal across all agencies, irrespective of their budgets.

N: Ohhhhh. I see… so the same amount is...

T: … so it’s ‘fair’
The question of how budgets make Parks work is central to the quality of service and facilities in any given year, as well as the tendency for facilities to get run down over years of small cuts. In some years, pool closures are threatened as a result of budget cuts, such as in the 2010 fight over the Douglas-DeGraw pool in Brooklyn (locally known as Double D), which largely serves the residents of the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) Wyckoff and Gowanus Housing Projects. (As one reporter at the time pointed out, “the pool... will remain closed this summer so that the city can save $200,000 — which represents three-millionths of the city budget” (Kuntzman, 2010).)

These present-day details can be understood as part of the ‘building’ aspect of municipal bathing. While it would be difficult to understand the whole process of operations in any historical period described here, it is possible to see that the difficulties described over much of this story are budgetary.

**How do municipal swimming pools work in New York City today?**

In Chapter One, I argue that the municipal pools of today ‘work’ in many ways: they work as a site of health, cooling, fitness, childcare, and play in a dense city. The pools in New York City are currently open from the day after public schools let out until the day before they open again. They are effectively a site of free child care for working parents and guardians who cannot either take off work, nor send their children to day camp, or are not able fill all of the days of school summer vacation with structured activity. New York City pools are also a site for distribution of USDA lunches that many families, whose children usually get lunch at school,

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119 In other periods, pools were open only on weekends beginning at the end of May, and increased hours at the end of June. (Press Release, 1960)
depend on during the summer months. Thus, in a city in which social services are often too few to serve everyone, or bureaucratically hard to access, the pools are a quick, free way to get supervised care and food for children. Common also is for one care-taker (parent, older sibling, friend) to be in charge of a large group of children at the pool, which they might not be able to do at home or in another setting. Some day camps also use the pool for swimming lessons before opening hours (which I observed at Kosciuszko pool), or have a section cordoned off for their group (which I observed at Lasker pool in Central Park).

The pools also, as mentioned in various places here, keep teenagers ‘off the streets and out of trouble,’ particularly in the afternoon hours, which are hottest. While some object to this as a measure of control rather than assistance, it might also be interpreted as a fairly good use of a small part of the city’s resources, if young people are taken seriously as a group of people who need to occupy their days. A corollary to this is that the outdoor pools in the summer provide well-compensated jobs for the team of lifeguards, many of them high school students.

Another adjunct to care and supervision is cooling. On New York’s hottest summer days, the heat and humidity can be truly harmful to people who do not have or cannot afford air conditioning in their apartments. On very hot days, local radio stations might announce cooling stations around the city, operated by the City’s Office of Emergency Management, using both spaces that belong to the city as well as those donated by the Salvation Army and other charity groups – places where people can sit in air conditioned rooms and drink cold water. And it is on these scorching hot days that the pools are most full, providing some relief for a very large number of people. This is not an inconsequential function: “more people die in heat waves than in all other extreme meteorological events combined” (Klinenberg, 2002: 17).
A day at the outdoor pool in the summer is also divided temporally to serve a number of different needs. As mentioned in Chapter Four swim lessons are offered for free, for children, adults, and toddlers (with their parents) depending on the pool. Children’s lessons are often in the morning, while adults learn in the evening during adult lap swim, at pools where it is offered. Senior swim (or Senior Splash) was also introduced in 2012 (Chapter Six); the program has expanded and is now offered two mornings each week at sixteen pools, including water aerobics classes.

Lap swimming is offered at fifteen pools, in the mornings from 7 to 8:30 AM and in the evenings from 7 to 830 PM. In order to participate in official lap swim (as opposed to casual lap swim, which is possible in roped off areas at some pools during regular open swimming time). Participants in lap swimming have to be over 18, and sign up online to receive a card; the whole process is free of charge, but does require advance planning, and an internet connection.

The energy is different than the rest of the pool day: lanes are marked and orderly in only in one part of the pool, with a careful watch on lane speed. A slow swimmer will be summoned out of the water by a lifeguard and moved to a different lane in order to keep swim traffic flowing. At the end of the season, the Aquatics division of Parks awards t-shirts and other prizes for achieving distance goals. Another side of this program, however, is that the early morning and late evening hours seem to reinforce class divisions at the pool, through the temporal rhythms of the 9 – 5 workday, which is not an option for everyone.

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120 As mentioned in Chapter One, free swim lessons are oversubscribed throughout the system. I attempted, through repeated emails to Parks administrators, to find out what percentage of applicants get into free swim lessons through the lottery system, but to no avail. On June 9, 2014 I filed a FOIL request for this information, and have not received a response to date.
In addition to these programmatic elements, I argue that the outdoor pool in the summer ‘works’ by providing a place for unstructured recreation and play. The corporeal public that has been produced through the long project of building infrastructure for municipal bathing today also denotes a public that is able to attend pools around the city, free of charge, where the scene is generally one of relaxation and joy. No one talks on their cellphone (as they are prohibited), and people generally get along. In these scenes, there is some of competitive swimmer Annette Kellerman’s (1918) admonition, "There is nothing more democratic than swimming. Bathing is a society event but swimming ... is just plain social. Every one is happy and young and funny. No one argues. No one scolds. There is no time and no place where one may so companionably play the fool and not be called one" (36).

The programs that I mention above—swim lessons, lap swimming, senior swim—have all expanded in the past decade, through the efforts of different advocates in the Parks Department as well as outside of it. At other times in the municipal bathing project, special times have been assigned to groups with special needs, including blind students, and people with developmental disabilities, and perhaps these will be expanded too in the coming years.

The indoor pools—although they are fewer and charge a fee that has increased over time—work by supporting swim lessons, youth swim teams, water aerobics and other classes, and a place for play at times as well. Although the Harlem Honeys and Bears are a unique group in character, some of what they provide is replicable, and their example will make expansion of services possible. The existence of the pools makes this possible, even if the imaginative capacity of city agencies can, at times, seem limited.
However, as mentioned at many points throughout this dissertation, municipal bathing has never been perfect. From the river baths in polluted waters to the highly surveilled bathhouse, ‘public’ has often been a proxy for ‘bad services for poor people.’ At times, this has also had the effect of working by separating poor people (as in the free period for children in the 1930s – 1960s, discussed in Chapter Three) and making them into a separate public. It is easy to point out the flaws of many of the contemporary outdoor pools in the summer: the number of rules, and their enforcement—at times too strict-seeming, and at times unevenly applied—can feel restrictive.

Some pools, either by the design of the physical spaces, the lack of maintenance, or the uneven distribution of capital budgets around the city, seem run-down or grimy by the end of the season. This might be attributed, on site, to poorly paid workers or lack of supervision. Yet more broadly, the upkeep of each may have to do with a too-small budget, for the Parks Department, within which the distribution of capital and resources is not centralized or equally allocated, but relies on political influence to some extent.

But in spite of this, the fact that the municipal bathing project has intervened repeatedly in the commercial landscape of bathing means that a majority of people have access—in the sense of physical proximity if not of belonging—to what might otherwise be considered a luxury

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121 Another un-feature of the pools is the ready use of metal police barricades and caution tape—the most readily available temporary building materials—to mark off areas where patrons shouldn’t go, or to direct traffic. At McCarren pool, a central area that was designed with a spray area for play in the center of the “C” shape of the tank, which is filled with in-ground sprinklers. However, the design also compels to walk right onto the pool deck without going through the surveillance gauntlets of the locker rooms and adjoining showers. So instead, the ‘beach’ is blocked off with a row of police barricades, leaving small corridors of space near the edges of the pool. In the first summer, this seemed a makeshift solution, but by the second or third, these barricades were zip-tied together into an immovable fence, disrupting the architecture of the space, and also implying a law-and-order atmosphere. At other pools, the same barricades, along with messily strung yellow plastic caution tape—to block off a broken wheelchair lift, or to keep patrons away from a part of the pool that is not being used due to mechanical failure—are used to similar effect.
space. One way to consider the extent of this success is through the counterfactual: that is, what if no municipal bathhouses or pools had ever been built? What would have happened if municipal bathing, from the time of the river bath to the present were left up to private clubs and organizations, including charity groups? Would the vast majority of New Yorkers have been left out? The poorest? Certain racial or ethnic groups? Would poor people be subject to more control, or sudden shutdowns of the places they relied on as they became financially unsustainable? Alternately, what if no pools had been built in any period described here (Chapter Two)? Would each subsequent wave of building have been possible? With these questions, I consider how the meaning of the building project might seem different than the interpretation I impose now, looking backward on a trajectory over 150 years.

**In what context does the pool work?**

As I note in Chapter Two, the municipal pool *always* intervened in a landscape of already-existing social bathing spaces in New York City. This issue ended up being far more significant than I could have anticipated, and could become a more central topic for future research. The main topic areas that will provide a more robust context for the story here are the commercial and ethnic baths (over the same long time period), and the rise of public beaches.

In *The Amphibious Public*, I gesture at the commercial, nonprofit and charity organizations that had their own bathing project, which has alternately coincided with and departed from the municipal efforts. But in the course of research, I came to understand that the private bathing environment (including today, when private bathing spaces make up about
80% of all NYC bathing spaces, according to documents from the Department of Buildings) was even more vast than I had anticipated in almost every historical period. Understanding this context in its richness of purpose, form and tone would provide a great contrast for the endeavor that I describe here.

The other major contextual element to support this research is the rise of the public beach (and the private landscape of those as well) that has been the counterpart to the ‘domesticated’ water of the baths and pools for a long time. Unlike the municipal pools and baths, which indicate decisions to increase access to water in terms of proximity and cost, the beaches are less restricted (and perhaps more dangerous), and similarities and differences in beach going from the pools and baths express another side of the publicness of space.

**Future research**

*The Amphibious Public* takes a very large scope as its object of study, both in terms of topic and historical period. While many histories of parts of municipal bathing projects in American cities exist, a close look at some historical sources pointed out contradictions in the way the story was told in different eras, and other sources opened up new sets of questions I had not anticipated. Other bits of data that I did hope to find were difficult to track down or unavailable, and I look forward to seeking them out in the future. Three major areas of research will strengthen this project in future research: the decision to make outdoor municipal pools free in New York City the summer; the programs of showers and pools inside of the Board of Education; and the program of building outdoor pools under the Lindsay administration. Understanding each of these will animate the project facing systems of power that had an
effect on the corporeal public. Tangential research, which I mention briefly, includes the
adjuncts to the municipal bathing by private organizations or conservancies.

The decision to make the municipal outdoor pools free

As this was the guiding concern when I began thinking about this project, my inability to
find the files that describe the decision to stop charging for the municipal pools in the summer
has been somewhat maddening. As I mention in Chapter Three: Fee or Free, the thoroughness
of the records under Moses as Parks commissioner, and the subsequent thinness of records,
points to the fact that the same department operated as quite different institutions under
different leadership.

Unlike the Parks Department that published prolific press releases down to the number
of swimmers at each pool up through the 1960s, the decision to make the pools free has no
record that I have found in the newspaper archives. One could speculate that part of the
decision had to do with the simple administrative cost of collecting the money – a nominal fee
that, having not changed in numerical value since the 1930s, could no longer have been
covering any significant part of the Parks Department operating budget. Another, as my
informant in Brooklyn Parks administration surmised, was that they could stop charging a fee so
they went for it. There also could have been a general interest in increasing pools attendance
on the part of Parks officials in the years around the fiscal crisis in order to rationalize keeping
them open at all.

But the greater question remains – why was the elimination of the fees at the pools not
met with any fanfare? Why wasn’t this program the object of huge promotions, as it would be
today if a facility that had previously charged were made free? While there is a general dearth of Parks records from the 1970s and 80s (the online records show press releases from 1934 to 1970), this decision did not seem to have made even a blip in the press.

**Pools in Public Schools**

While the Board of Education built showers and then pools in school buildings in the early to mid-20th century, and swimming lessons at public schools are now being revived, I was able to find very little data about its relationship to the Parks Department. Perhaps the connections were not very strong, though the cultural ideals behind them seemed to operate in tandem often enough to compel future research. In a complete list of indoor pool facilities from the Department of Buildings, I was able to count the 35 pools that exist in New York City public schools today, but the number does not exist on their website nor in any newspapers I was able to find. A 1966 report from the University of the State of New York (now SUNY) tells us something about the statewide pools initiative, but not necessarily the City:

> In New York State, there was a spectacular increase of 92 percent in the number of school pools constructed during the 10-year period ending in 1965. The number of school districts that built at least one pool increased by 4 percent in those 10 years.

This provides an era on which to focus, but not necessarily any specifics, as New York City politics and funding often diverge from the rest of the state.

Future research in the municipal archives on the Board of Education might offer insight into the decision to include pools in the physical plant of schools and to offer swimming instruction, as well as the decision to end them (and likely conflicts over this.) School programs of cleansing baths, and courses in hygiene, would be part this investigation as well. The decision
to install pools in the schools was much more closely and obviously tied to swim instruction
than it was in the outdoor pools, and the role of physical education in the overall curriculum
warrants further investigation.

*Expanded research on the Lindsay administration’s pools boom*

The Lindsay administration, in addition to the pools they built all around the city—including mini-pools, pools on flatbed trucks and intermediate pools—had a plan to build pools
on barges all around Manhattan. Future research would look at the extent to which this was
studied and considered, by whom, and how the decision was made to complete the parts of the
project that were finished, and not the others. This would involve archival research into memos
from the Office of the Mayor, as well as the minutes of the city council.

*Adjuncts to the municipal bathing project*

In 1999, Ann Buttenwieser established the Neptune Foundation to purchase a
decommissioned barge, and build the first barge ship since the early 20th century in New York
City. The barge pool has received design and building awards. While it resided for many years in
Brooklyn, today it is moored in the south Bronx, with a commanding view down the northern
tip of Manhattan. Today, however, Parks pays to maintain the ship, to dock it in the winter, to
run water pipes out to it each summer, and so forth -- a very expensive endeavor. Although
parks did not commission it originally, it now provides a service to the South Bronx that would
be difficult to take away.
In another case, the Brooklyn Bridge Park Corporation, a nonprofit organization that uses revenue from a residential development in order to build and maintain Brooklyn Bridge Park, have built what was billed as a ‘pop up pool,’ with a capacity of about 100 swimmers. Locker rooms are housed beside it in repurposed shipping containers, and a sandy ‘beach’ area is located outside of the fence. Parks, however, does not run the pool, and none of the procedures are the same. Lifeguards do not wear the orange Parks Department swimsuits. Admission to the pool is free, but patrons must line up to get a wristband in advance of the 90-minute swim periods. (Very enterprising children have already learned to game the system by getting out of their swim period a few minutes early and going to wait in line again.) More important, however, there is nothing ‘pop up’ about the pool. Like a backyard pool, it is sunk into the ground and made of concrete. While its name suggests that its lifespan is only meant to be a few years, it will likely stick around.

The ‘plus pool’ is a new designed billed as “The World’s First Water-Filtering, Floating Pool in New York.” The pool was designed by a group of architects and engineers, who have created a system that uses multiple layers of ever-finer filters to flow river water into its tanks. The company has raised at least part of its funds through a Kickstarter campaign in which supporters can ‘buy’ a pool tile with their name engraved on it for $25 to $249 (or donate larger amounts.) While New York State Senator Daniel Squadron, and City Councilman Brad Lander are supporters of the project (+ Pool, 2014), the relationship of such a project to the Parks Department or other city agencies is not yet published.

Municipal baths and pools, as always, continue to intervene in landscapes of private and commercial bathing. While the innovations are exciting, these models (along with the
conservancy attached to McCarren pool), they also raise questions about the extent to which state ownership and management of public space will continue and the extent to which it is necessary. Incorporating private designs or even ‘gifts’ into the management and budget of an already under resourced Parks Department is complex, if exciting.

The municipal bathing project in New York has been quite variable over almost 150 years. To some extent, this has had to do with the availability of different kinds of plumbing in people’s homes over time but, more important, reflects shifting priorities around the social, around public spaces, and in terms of who has gotten to set those priorities in different periods. As debates over public space tend to focus on freedom of speech and on ownership (privatization, conservancies), the municipal bathing project in New York City showcases a series of public spaces that, though imperfect, have promoted democratic life in the city through access – spatial, distributive and positive.
Appendix A: Letters to the Editor, the New York Times

12.19.10 (published)

To the Editor:

“To Trim Deficit, Mayor Seeks Increased Fees for Recreation” (news article, Dec. 8) highlights the contradiction in doubling the price for public exercise facilities in the midst of a campaign to prevent obesity.

New York City is the home of some of our nation’s first and most exemplary public spaces, including pools, sports fields and recreation centers that were free until 2002. As a doctoral student, I trace the rise of New York’s public spaces in creating the vibrant civic life of which we are so proud.

Frederick Law Olmsted had more than Central Park in mind when wrote, in 1870, that “this problem of public recreation grounds… should at once be made a subject… of a very generous character.” At a moment in which tough budgetary choices need to be made, the health of New York’s citizens should be held up as a priority far into the future.

Naomi Adiv
Brooklyn, Dec. 13, 2010
To the Editors:

I was greatly disheartened to read that the Harlem Honeys and Bears are without a home, after renovations began early at Hansborough pool (Turkewitz, During Renovations, a Team of Older Swimmers Is Left Without a Home, 10/18/12.) I have worked with the Honeys and Bears for the last nine months as part of my dissertation research on public pools; I find them emblematic of the power of Senior Citizens and, indeed, all citizens, to organize themselves in beneficial ways inside of a robust public infrastructure.

While the pool and lockers at Hansborough are badly in need of repair, and renovation is welcome, arrangements should have been made for the Honeys and Bears, and other swimmers in their community. Particularly frustrating was Parks spokesperson Karp’s statement that “they aren’t an official parks department program.” In addition to teaching both seniors and youth to swim, this spirited group often performs at Parks Department events to promote Senior Swim, and the culture of fitness that the city has been promoting in the past few years.

New York City is a hard place to be poor, and a harder place to be old. The Honeys and Bears represent who I’d like to be someday: an elder sharing health, joy, and community with those around me.

Sincerely,
Naomi Adiv
CUNY Graduate Center
### Appendix B: Pool attendance, 2010 – 2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Pool 1</th>
<th>Pool 2</th>
<th>Pool 3</th>
<th>Pool 4</th>
<th>Pool 5</th>
<th>Pool 6</th>
<th>Pool 7</th>
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<td>234</td>
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<td>123</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C: New York City Parks Department Outdoor Pool Rules
(Source: http://www.nycgovparks.org/facility/pools/rules)

For everybody’s health, safety, and protection, we ask our guests to observe the following rules:

• Bathing suits must be worn on the deck and in the water. Men’s bathing suits must have mesh linings. Hats may be worn on the deck for sun protection but are not allowed in the water. Plain white T-shirts may be worn over bathing suits if desired. Sneakers are not permitted. Rubber flip-flops or water shoes are permitted.

• No urinating or defecating in the pools.

• Children under 16 must be at least eight inches taller than the maximum water depth to enter the pool without adult supervision. Specific height requirements are posted at every pool.

• No person will be permitted in the pool having: skin lesions, sores, or inflamed eyes, mouth, nose, or ear discharge, carrying communicable disease or having any type of bandage, adhesive tape, etc., on their body.

• All bathers must take a shower in the locker room before entering the pool.

• Patrons must provide and use their own padlock. No responsibility is assumed for lost articles. A standard master or combination lock is recommended. Small luggage locks are not permitted.

• The use of swimming aids, water toys, and flotation devices is prohibited.

• Electronic equipment, including radios, cameras, and cellular phones, is not allowed on pool deck.

• Eating or drinking is permitted only in designated areas. Alcoholic beverages are prohibited.

• Beach chairs, baby strollers, bags, blankets, or beach balls are not permitted on the pool deck. We will make our best effort to secure strollers.

• Follow the directives of lifeguards, Parks staff, and the police.

• Ball playing, running, jumping, using profane language or other forms of disruptive and disorderly behavior are prohibited.
• No diving, except in designated areas.

• No smoking, pets, or glass bottles permitted.

• Books and bound periodicals are permitted on the pool deck. Newspapers are not.
Appendix D: Archives sourced

This dissertation draws from the following archives:

The New York City Municipal Archives:
  - WPA Writer’s Project city guide drafts
  - Records from the Department of Parks (1870 – 1966) with a special focus on the years 1934 - 1965
  - Records from the Lindsay administration

The New York Public Library
  - Historic photographs in the Milstein Division of United States History, Local History and Genealogy
  - Reports from citizens’ groups and government bodies promoting municipal baths – late 19th century in the General Collection
  - Trade publications for swimming pools, early 20th century at the Science, Industry and Business Library (SIBL)

Bobst Library, New York University
  - Twentieth century swimming, pool construction
  - Life-saving manuals, Twentieth century

The New York Historical Society
  - New York City and State government reports on public health
  - Broadsides, bathhouse ads and swimming manuals, late Nineteenth and early Twentieth century

The New York Times archive (online)
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Autobiographical Statement